

The Pastor & Politics
SGC Pastors Conference – November 15, 2023

I. Introduction – “Why this breakout session *now*?”

- Cultural upheaval
- Political despair
- Evangelical Reactions
- How should we think about the political sphere in light of our calling to pastor Christ’s people?

II. Foundations for a Biblical Political Theology

A. The storyline of Scripture provides the framework for understanding the political sphere.

1. As the pinnacle of his creation, God creates man in his image, with a commission to rule the earth as his vice-regent:
 - “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen 1:27-28)
2. The entrance of sin distorted man’s relationship with God and damaged his capacity for godly dominion. (Gen 3:16-19, 23-24)
3. Christ’s redemption fully reconciles man to God and progressively restores his people to share in his rule—a restoration that will be complete in the new creation. (Romans 8:18-25)
4. In the world between the coming of Christ and the consummation, God uses government, not to establish God’s kingdom, but to provide a setting of peace and order in which he advances his kingdom in a fallen world.¹
 - 1 Timothy 2:1-4: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

¹ For a helpful biblical-theological perspective on politics from a Reformed perspective, see David C. Innes, *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men: Foundations of Political Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019), 1-20.

B. Human government and the society of God’s people—the church—in the current era have separate jurisdictions.

- *Excursus*: The necessity to make appropriate “salvation-historical adjustments”
 - Under the Old Covenant, “church & state” among the people of God were a single entity: to be a member of the nation was to be in the community of God’s people.

“The common thread running through all these [OT] political conditions was their connection to the ethnic nation of Israel. Though those who were not physically descended from Abraham could become part of God’s visible people, they could do so only by formally joining the nation of the Jews. They could not visibly and outwardly be people of God while also remaining members of some other nations. Because of this, all aspects of social life for those who followed God—including their political systems—were subordinate to, and dependent upon, the existence of the distinct Jewish nation.”²

- Under the new covenant, with a better mediator and better promises—including the indwelling Spirit and transformed hearts—the people of God are no longer configured as a racial, national, geo-political entity, but as a regenerate community of those in Christ.
- As a provision of his common grace, God authorizes human governments for the good of society, and ultimately for the sake of his ongoing work of redemption (1 Tim 2:1-4).
- This is not to diminish God’s sovereignty over any sphere of existence. God’s sovereignty is pervasive, over all things and over all rule (Daniel 4:25). However, *he doesn’t rule over everything in the same way.*

1. Human Government (“State”)

- a. Government’s Purpose: God establishes human governments to protect life (Gen 9:6) and to preserve conditions that facilitate human flourishing in general, and the church’s pursuit of its mission in particular. Such conditions include peace (1 Tim 2:2) and a just moral order (Romans 13:3-4; 1 Peter 2:14; e.g., restraining & punishing evil, encouraging virtue)
- b. Government’s Sphere (*What* it rules): Human governments are given for the outward order and good of human society.

“Government action cannot make people moral, but it can protect the conditions in

² Greg Forster, *The Contested Public Square* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 22.

which people most easily thrive morally, such as healthy, stable family life.”³

- c. Government’s Power (*How* it rules): Human governments are given “the power of the sword”: morally legitimate coercive force for the purposes of justice.⁴

“While civil government can neither generate love nor coerce it, *it can do what is within its sphere of competence*: to protect the spiritual environment, conditions favorable to cultivate that love for God. In doing this, it is not doing the work of the church but only removing the impediments to an accommodating environment for that work.”⁵

2. The Church

- a. The Church’s Purpose: The church is the visible body of Christ’s people that exists for the worship of God, the spiritual well-being of its members, and the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of unbelievers.
- b. The Church’s Sphere (*What* it rules): The church uses its authority to the end of the salvation of sinners, the spiritual good of believers, and the spiritual integrity of the church.
- c. The Church’s Power (*How* it rules): The church is given the power of the “keys”: to protect and proclaim the gospel, and to identify and preserve the integrity of those who are part of the church.

3. Ideally these two institutions should *not* be indifferent toward each other, but they are intended by God to *function* separately.

- a. Neither institution should encroach upon (i.e., exercise illegitimate power over) the God-ordained authority of the other.
- Mark 12:17: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”
 - Jesus does *not* imply that Caesar’s realm falls *outside of* God’s sovereignty—Caesar and every other human being bears God’s image and exists under his sovereign authority. But Jesus does acknowledge that Caesar rules over a temporal realm—one to which Christians are subject (cf. Rom 13:1)

³ Innes, *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*, 88.

⁴ See, e.g., Jonathan Leeman, “Baptists in Babylon: On the Role of Politics in Modern Baptist Life,” in *Baptist Political Theology*, eds. Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2023), 505.

⁵ Innes, *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*, 78 (emphasis added).

- b. This does *not* mean the state is “secular” or morally neutral; every law reflects some standard of morality. Ideally, the state should govern out of a worldview informed by the standards of God’s Word. Given the “educational” nature of laws, such governance could even be said to have the *effect* of promoting a Christian worldview (i.e., “separation of church and state” ≠ “separation of religion and politics”—such a thing is impossible for people made in God’s image). However, the New Testament has no category for the merging of the government and the church, such that the former is ruling over the sphere of, and attempting to bring about the ends of, the latter.⁶
- c. Neither is the church to seek to wield “the power of the sword.”
- John 18:36: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”
 - It is not the church’s role to exercise authority over the secular realm for temporal purposes; it has a far greater and more significant role of proclaiming the gospel for eternal purposes.
 - However, this does not mean that the church should not seek to *influence* the political sphere—the question is “how?”, “to what ends?” and “what should our expectations be?” Through its faithful proclamation, and its godly and loving public witness, it should contend for the gospel and the truth and standards of God’s Word, both for the common good of people and, especially, to foster an environment conducive to the gospel’s progress.
 - At all times, the church must remember its identity and its Christ-given mission. The New Covenant was given to gather God’s elect to himself and to bind them together in the church, through the work of Christ, and not as a political program for the temporal governance of nations in the church age. We are not to expect God’s kingdom to be expressed politically in this age, prior to Christ’s return.
- C. Christians are members of two “societies” – of both the church, and the secular realm governed by the state.

⁶ This is a complex area of political theory, with a spectrum of views and emphases, as well as dimensions beyond our immediate concern. For example, we could also speak of other “spheres of authority,” such as the family, or even of commerce, science, art, etc. Protestant political thought has also affirmed that the state has no right to infringe upon other legitimate spheres of authority, especially the family. (except when the state is fulfilling its God-given role of, e.g., protecting life; hence child abuse laws). Representative of this is Abraham Kuyper’s concept of “sphere sovereignty,” laid out in his inaugural address for the Free University of Amsterdam, which can be found in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998), 461-490 (this address also contains Kuyper’s famous statement about Christ’s claim of “Mine!” over all human existence, p. 488). Such views impinge upon any number of policy decisions a government might make concerning the family (e.g., state educational curriculum), commerce (e.g., regulation of business), etc.

1. With regard to the state, Christians are, like anyone else, citizens.
 - a. This obligates the Christian to be subject to his nation's (or state's or municipality's) authority and live by its laws (Romans 13:1-2)—*unless* the state compels him to sin (Acts 4:18-19; 5:29).⁷

⁷ This is arguably the most common position among at least conservative Christians. It is represented by, e.g., Augsburg Confession, Art. XVI: "Christians are necessarily bound to obey their own magistrates and laws save only when commanded to sin;" see also John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.7. Calvin qualified his position by allowing that popular (lesser) magistrates had the authority, indeed the obligation, to withstand oppressive rulers on behalf of the people at large (*Institutes*, 4.20.31). This same principle has often been applied to demonstrate the legitimacy of the American revolution which, after long and patient appeals to the British crown, was engineered by rightful representatives of the colonies.

Despite the broad agreement concerning the general principle of submission, this view is not without disagreement. David Innes (*Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*, 157-161) outlines the major objections that historically have been lodged against this principle of submission. In the wake of the events of 2020, such objections have proliferated. In the United States, a common qualification involves laws that are unconstitutional, which deems them illegitimate laws. This doesn't solve the dilemma of who determines the unconstitutionality of a law. Structurally, it is the judiciary (state and federal judges) which makes such determinations—but what about when judges depart from textualist or originalist readings of the Constitution and, e.g., discover "rights" not enumerated in that document?

Some, like Francis Schaeffer in *A Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1981), 90-93, argue that Christians are not obligated to obey authorities when they act unjustly. In other words, there are exceptions (beyond merely a government's requirement that a Christian sin) to Paul's command in Romans 13:1-2 to obey rulers. The details of such arguments are beyond the scope of this session, but a few reflections on this topic seem appropriate: (a) the unqualified nature of Paul's commands in Romans 13 set forth a clear, general responsibility for the Christian to submit to governmental authorities, unless they are compelling him to sin; (b) short of this, if a government makes demands that seem unjust or (in the case of the United States) unconstitutional, a Christian should first always seek legal means of challenging such laws or requirements (the principle of "lesser magistrates"); (c) if on the basis of other biblical texts/considerations one concludes that there may be exceptions to Paul's commands in Romans 13 (e.g., the exception of disobeying an authority in order to avoid sin—which Paul does not state in Romans 13 but which is clear in Acts 4:18-19 and 5:29—implies that there may be *other* exceptions as well, such as when a government is failing to "punish evil" and "reward good"), a number of factors should be carefully considered: Is there another recourse available than civil disobedience? Is a law so flagrantly unjust that it justifies disregarding Scripture's general command to submit? What *consequences* could come of my disobedience? (e.g., damage to the cause of Christ, harm to my and/or the church's reputation, etc.). Wherever one lands on such issues, it seems that civil disobedience for a Christian (unless the alternative is sinning against God) should be pursued only after other legal options have been exhausted and thus should generally be a last resort; it should be reserved for particularly wicked laws; and it should be pursued humbly with a desire to exalt Christ and forward his purposes. It should not be the expression of a rebellious impulse or a reactionary demand to exercise one's rights. At the end of the day, any "Christian resistance" or civil disobedience must be reconciled by such explicit, Christ-honoring ideals such as leading "a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim 2:2); "For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people" (1 Peter 2:15); and commands such as "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom 12:18), and "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:16"); et al. For a recent, thoughtful example of a perspective that sees more exceptions to the submission principle than merely the compulsion to sin," see Zachary Garris, "Romans 13 and Civil Disobedience to Unconstitutional and Unjust Laws," *Knowing Scripture* (blog). February 8, 2022.

<https://knowingscripture.com/articles/romans-13-civil-disobedience-to-unconstitutional-unjust-laws#1>.

- b. The Christian's call to love God and others should *incline* him toward responsible citizenship and healthy civic life (Matt 5:13-16; Gal 6:10a).⁸
 - c. As a *Christian* citizen, a believer should use his gifts and opportunities to wisely, humbly, and courageously represent Christ in the public square for his glory and the common good—e.g.: pray for those in authority; testify to God's righteous standards; seek to be a godly influence; appeal to a nation's/community's/individual's God-given sense of morality and virtue; be an informed voter; run for office!
2. The Christian's real home and true citizenship is in the kingdom of God, and he reserves his highest allegiance, his most diligent labors, and his greatest affection for Christ and His church.
 - a. A Christian's earthly citizenship *must* be qualified by his heavenly citizenship: its calling, priorities, and obligations, along with its joys & privileges.
 - b. When a Christian treasures Christ and lives faithfully for him (through worship, a godly marriage, faithful parenting, holy living, fervent evangelism, etc.), he will be serving the culture around him in the best possible way.

III. Pillars to Protect the Church's Mission

- With regard to the responsibilities of a pastor, virtually every political question quickly becomes a "church mission" question.
- One of the most important ways for a pastor to be faithful in the political sphere is to be appropriately focused on the spiritual sphere: the gospel, the church, & his calling.

1. The clarity of the church's mandate

- Underlying many of the evangelical disputes concerning politics are differing ideas and impulses concerning the mission of the church—particular, how the church is to respond to the culture.
- Impulses to "withdraw" can tend to fear or complacency.
- Impulses to "engage" can lead to a broadening (and, at times, a distortion) of the church's mission.

⁸ Innes, *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*, 183. Don Carson points out that, in contrast to early Christians in the Roman Empire, the reality of living in a modern democracy brings both new freedoms and new responsibilities: ". . . the biblical injunctions to submit to the state as to God means, in our context, that we *must* take our obligations toward a *participatory* democracy seriously." D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 196 (emphasis his).

- The SGC Statement of Faith: “The Church” — “Purpose & Mission of the Church”

“The church’s mission is to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded. We do this by proclaiming the gospel, planting churches, and adorning the proclamation of the gospel through our love and good works.”

- Whatever burdens we might carry, whatever needs surround us, whatever “good works” to which God may call specific people in our churches, this mission is crystal clear in Scripture and thus is non-negotiable. And it’s the only mission that comes with the promise of Christ’s presence and power.

2. The clarity of the pastor’s call

- The important distinction between what an individual Christian may be called to, and the call of a pastor and the mission of the church as an institution.

3. The pilgrim status of the people of God in the church age

- Our fundamental identity vis-à-vis the world: we are “strangers & aliens” in a fallen world that opposes God and those who belong to him.
- The believer should have great hope that Christ will build his church (Matt 16:18) and the gospel will be proclaimed as a testimony to all the nations (Matt 24:14). But until Christ’s return, we will always be living in the “already, not yet.”
- Pastors must never seek to remove this eschatological tension in our existence as Christians.

4. The eschatological hope of the Christian

- Our “blessed hope” is not a transformed culture, not dominion over earthly structures, but “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13)
- The importance of thinking rightly about “God’s kingdom”: His kingdom of power, of grace, and of glory.⁹
- As pastors, we must never allow other hopes—lesser hopes—temporal hopes—to eclipse, much less to displace, our “blessed hope.”

5. The nature of the church: the new covenant people of God

⁹ Such distinctions have a long history in the Reformed tradition. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 371-372.

- Any discussions about the mission of the church must begin with the *nature* of the church: the communion of saints, gathered by God for preaching, teaching, sacrament, prayer, fellowship, and witness.
- The nature of the church has obvious and crucial implications for those called to lead the church.

IV. Pastoral Strategies for Political Temptations

- Realize that our people are immersed in a politicized culture and inundated with politicized (and, usually, highly charged) opinions.
- Faithfully proclaim God’s Word so that its truths stand forth for your people as the most glorious and consequential realities, and a divine standard that evaluates, interprets, and judges all worldly ideas and opinions.
- Help people see that, while culture and politics are important, they are not ultimate.
 - Politics deals with very important issues that we want to be careful not to minimize: the right ordering of society; biblical anthropology; God’s creational purposes for human beings, etc. But we do want such issues to be informed by a transcendent perspective—one that helps people engage ideas and pursue burdens with faith and peace, resting in God, his faithfulness, and his promises.
 - Consider: to what extent are the people in my church diagnosing cultural problems, and proposing solutions, *primarily* in political terms?

“People place perfectionistic hopes on the state as if it could accomplish all righteousness. The new covenant, however, teaches Christians to invest their political hopes for real change and real justice in the gospel and the church, not in the next election or Supreme Court nomination.”¹⁰
- Help people “prioritize their passions,” distinguishing the transcendent from the temporal, the biblical from the prudential, and the vital from the trivial.
- Help people perceive the temptations that political engagement, and especially political fascination and preoccupation, can bring.
- Help politically engaged people have as a goal, not political victory, but Christian faithfulness.

¹⁰ Leeman, “Baptists in Babylon,” 509.

- G. Help people evaluate social and political phenomena (ideas, events, policies) by standards of sound theology, biblical principle, and worldview.
- H. As a pastor, be slow to address specific matters of political concern and public policy, unless such issues are explicit in Scripture or clearly implied by Scripture.
- A word on addressing crises.
 - Consider the *variety* of ways you might address an issue with your church beyond just the sermon: pastoral prayer; the Call to Worship; announcements; a Sunday class, etc.
- I. Help people understand why we, as pastors, are careful in speaking to political issues (given our calling, responsibilities, and competencies)
- A related task: help people understand the difference between their callings, burdens, and activities as an individual Christian, and those of you as a pastor, and your church as a corporate body.¹¹
- J. Prepare your people for suffering in its various forms—including cultural marginalization and even potential political persecution.
- This is not pessimism or a lack of faith or a loss of nerve; suffering is simply part of a Christian’s call in a fallen world.
 - John 15:20: “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”
 - 1 Peter 2:20b-21: “But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”
 - 1 Peter 4:12-17: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God.”

¹¹ For a helpful discussion on this distinction, see Carson, *Christ and Culture*, 150-152.

- While we are to rejoice in Christ and labor in faith, we simply do not know God’s purposes for our nation or community in our lifetimes. If our call to share in Christ’s sufferings is absent from our “political” reflections, then it is less than biblical.

V. Conclusion

- Although a pastor’s concerns are not “political,” he can never really avoid politics, because the political sphere involves fundamental realities of human existence: the nature of man, God’s purposes for humanity, the right ordering of society, etc.
- To be sure, Christians are part of this society, but we are placed here to be salt and light in the society, to “shine like stars in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.”
- As we pursue our callings in our cultures—even (especially?) those serving Christ in the public square—we do so knowing that, over all politics—over all human kingdoms—over all cultures—Jesus Christ is Lord. And whatever the results of our labors, we know that one day, Christ’s Lordship will come in fullness: every knee will bow—every tongue will confess—and “all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord” (Numbers 14.21)

“Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the first and final assertion Christians make about all of reality, including politics. Believers now assert by faith what one day will be manifest to the sight of all: every earthly sovereignty is subordinate to the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. The Church is the bearer of that claim. Because the church is pledged to the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, it must maintain a critical distance from all the kingdoms of the world, whether actual or proposed. Christians betray their Lord if, in theory or practice, they equate the Kingdom of God with any political, social or economic order of this passing time. At best, such orders permit the proclamation of the gospel of the Kingdom and approximate, in small part, the freedom, peace, and justice for which we hope.”¹²

¹² Richard John Neuhaus, quoted by Carson, *Christ and Culture*, 203.