



# *The Last Days Beacon*

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Equipping End-Time Saints

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## THE CHURCH AND SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTION

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The topic of the church and socio-political action is fraught with controversy. One would expect this controversy to exist within society at large, in light of the diversity of perspectives in our multi-cultural society. However, there is a surprising breadth of perspective within Christendom on this issue as well. These views cover the entire spectrum, from total disengagement to total dominance, and everything in between. These approaches can be observed throughout church history within various sects of Christianity.

It is crucial, at the end of the church age, with its attendant proliferation of evil that an evangelical consensus emerge on this issue. This theological and tactical consensus will become increasingly important as the tentacles of secularism and totalitarianism intrude further into the lives of believers. It is my hope that such a consensus can be reached regardless on one's eschatological perspective. It is my view that there is far too much arguing among Christians regarding eschatology and far too little united effort being made on impacting society for Christ!

Where then, does the church turn to build this consensus? It is this author's view that it is the Scriptures themselves that present the building blocks for this consensus. For those who believe in the sufficiency of Scripture, this is to be expected. 2 Peter 1:2-4 states, "Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue; Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these we might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (KJV throughout). We turn, therefore, to the Scriptures themselves for the perspective on socio-political action that will build consensus.

### Summary of the Issue

It is important, at the outset, to define the concept of Christian socio-political action. Is it merely the acts of charity of Christians, either individually or corporately? If that were the case, there would be little in the way of controversy. In reality, Christian socio-political action is broader in scope and complexity. One snapshot of socio-political action is:

It looks beyond persons to structures, beyond the rehabilitation of prison inmates to the reform of the prison system, beyond improving factory conditions to securing a more participatory role for the workers, beyond caring for the poor to improving - and when necessary - transforming - the economic system (whatever it may be) and the political system (again, whatever it may be), until it facilitates their liberation from poverty and oppression.<sup>1</sup>

Fundamentally, this question deals with the relationship of the church to the world. It is the outworking of that delicate balance of being in the world, but not belonging to the world. Jesus addressed that issue in his high priestly prayer for believers in John 17:14-18:

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world; even so have I also sent them into the world.

There are two ends of the spectrum in terms of the attitudes which Christians can adopt towards their relationship with the "world." One is *escape* and the other is *engagement*. To *escape* the world means turning our backs on the world in rejection, and instead focusing solely on issues of personal piety. In contrast, *engagement* means turning our faces toward the world in compassion, and getting our hands dirty in its service.<sup>2</sup>

A parallel way of expressing the church's relationship to the world is whether it is the church's role to *passively submit* to culture in general and human government in particular, or to *actively resist* evil perpetrated by culture or governing authorities. This "resistance" motif is particularly relevant, because that seems to be the dominant scriptural approach to the issue of socio-political action. In other words, the Bible has far more to say about the believer's response to unjust government than it does about socio-political initiatives by the faithful in the context of a "just government." The "resistance" motif will, therefore, be primary in the discussion of views that fall along this spectrum.

## Contending Ethical Assertions and Arguments

In this section the two main views on the church and socio-political action will be surveyed. At the outset it must be admitted that there are many variants along the spectrum which, of necessity, will be omitted in this brief paper.

*Escape View.* While proponents of this view may chafe at this terminology, it is essentially an escapist position. Some have referred to it as a kind of *Caesaropapism*. It is the view that civil government, no matter how evil, belongs to the realm of God's providential rule, and must be obeyed. John Whitehead defines this view: "While we may enjoy the right to representation and protest, it remains that when the highest state authority in the land has spoken . . . Christians are obliged to obey."<sup>3</sup>

Usually, the line of argument for this position is as follows: Our commission is to preach the gospel, not reform society. Our confidence is in the providence of God, regardless of the political setting in which we find ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment*, The Grand Rapids Report (Exeter: Paternoster 1982) 45.

<sup>2</sup> John Stott, *Involvement* (Old Tappen, NJ: Revell, 1984), 1:35.

<sup>3</sup> John W. Whitehead, "Christian Resistance in the Face of State Interference," *The Theology of Christian Resistance*, Gary North, Ed. (Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1983), 9.

Our relationship to civil government is that of obedience, and our commitment is to pray for those in authority. After all, we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Our true citizenship is in heaven. John MacArthur expressed this position thusly:

As Christians we are to obey our civil authorities no matter whom they may be. Believers have a God-given duty to submit to the government, even when the ruler is as wicked as Nero.<sup>4</sup>

A view that often accompanies this escapist position is that of “religious neutrality.” In other words, Christians may participate in the political process only as citizens but never as believers. The Spirit of God and the Word of God cannot be allowed to enter the ballot booth or the marketplace where the real decisions of modern life are made. Religion must not interfere with the vital matters of politics or civil government. “These activities are all supposed to be ‘neutral’ and they can therefore be withdrawn from sectarian influences so that the secular spirit of the community may prevail.”<sup>5</sup>

*Engage View.* At the other end of the spectrum is the philosophy of *engagement*. It is the view that, while Christians are a heavenly people (Phil 3:20), there are obligations to engage the culture in a number of ways, including by socio-political action. Along with this view is the idea that human governments are accountable to God and His Word, and therefore, do not enjoy absolute power. Because Christians give their highest allegiance to God, there may be occasions when the dictates of human government are to be disobeyed.

This view has been expressed by several leading thinkers in Church history. John Calvin taught that obedience to human rulers should never lead away from obedience to God, “. . . to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commands ought to yield, to whose majesty their scepters ought to be submitted.”<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most fully developed articulation of this view was expressed by Samuel Rutherford, in his work, *Lex Rex*, subtitled “The Law is King” (1644). It was Rutherford’s assertion that the basic premise of civil government and its laws, must be the Bible. As such, all men, even the king, are under the law and not above it. Therefore, acts of the state that do not have a clear reference point in the Bible were considered to be illegitimate and acts of tyranny.<sup>7</sup>

There are, plainly, two ends of the spectrum on this issue. There is the escapist view which advocates a passive submission to the dictates of the state, regardless of their moral content. At the other end of the spectrum there is a view which advocates engagement with our culture, and, when necessary, active resistance toward authorities whose laws are contrary to the Bible. Let’s examine the scriptural perspective on this issue.

## Theological Perspective

There are two pivotal sections of Scripture that give us a theological perspective on the issue of Christian socio-political action. The first is a statement from Christ: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matt 22:21). This was a radical statement in terms of the ancient world’s understanding of the power of the state. “Far from acknowledging an unlimited authority of the state over the life of man, the words of Jesus relativize the power of human government by relating it to the more comprehensive and abiding claims of God.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong*, Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009), 126.

<sup>5</sup> E.L. Hebden Taylor, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality in Politics* (unpublished essay)

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) IV, xx. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Whitehead, “Christian Resistance,” 10.

<sup>8</sup> John J. Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985) 223.

Another critical passage is Romans 13:1-6, which will be highlighted selectively:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. *For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.* Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. *For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.* Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shall have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: *for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.* Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also *for conscience sake.* For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for *they are God's ministers,* attending continually upon this very thing.

There are some who misconstrue this passage to imply that human government has unlimited authority over its citizenry, and that it leaves Christians powerless to disobey. For this reason, Romans 13:1-7 was Adolf Hitler's favorite passage of Scripture. However, a closer look reveals a very different picture. For example, in verse one the words "governing authority" comes from *exousia*. The best rendering of this word is "delegated authority." In other words, all governing authorities must be under "delegated authority." It is God who delegates authority to human government. It would, therefore, ". . . be a major error of the first import, to subscribe all authority as being ordained of God without qualification. In other words, we are simply saying that God is not the author of tyranny."<sup>9</sup>

Notice also that the governing authority is "...the minister of God to thee for good..." (v 4). The clear implication is that when government ceases to be for your good it also ceases to be God's servant. When government ceases to be God's servant it ceases to be operating under the delegated authority of God. When government ceases to operate under the delegated authority of God the responsibility to submit ourselves to it also ceases.

Another limiting factor to the Christian's obedience is "conscience" (v 5). If a law cannot be obeyed in good conscience, informed by the Word of God, it cannot be obeyed. Romans 13, rather than granting unqualified authority to the state, "provides both an authoritative limitation on rulers and a duty of resistance to tyranny, as well as a basis for disobedience to ungodly laws promulgated by magistrates who fail to fulfill the high duties of their God-ordained ministry."<sup>10</sup>

## Biblical Examples

How do these principles find expression in the lives of biblical characters? Exodus 1:15-17 records the courageous refusal of the Hebrew midwives to obey Pharaoh's orders to kill the newborn male children of the Hebrew women:

And the king of Egypt spake to the Hebrew midwives...And he said, When ye do the office of midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the stools; if it be a son, then ye shall kill him: but if it be a daughter, then she shall live. But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive.

This is an amazing narrative! These defenseless midwives countermanded the order of the most powerful man on earth at the time, the Pharaoh of Egypt. They would have paid with their lives if their "disobedience" had been discovered. Let's see how they avoided detection in verses 18, 19:

And the king of Egypt called for the midwives, and said unto them, Why have ye done this thing, and have saved the men children alive? And the midwives said unto Pharaoh, because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptians women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwives come in unto them.

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<sup>9</sup> C.E. McLain, *Place of Government*, (Oklahoma City: Classics Publishing Trust, 1968), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Archie P. Jones, "Natural Law and Christian Resistance to Tyranny," in Gary North, ed., *The Theology of Christian Resistance* (Tyler, Texas: Geneva Divinity School, 1983), 104.

The narrative becomes even more dramatic at this point. Not only did these Hebrew midwives disobey the direct orders of the most powerful government official on earth, when called to task, they LIED TO HIM! This flies totally in the face of those who advocate unconditional submission to “the higher powers!” What did God think of the impudence and deception of these women? The answer is given in verses 20, 21:

Therefore God dealt well with the midwives: and the people multiplied and waxed very mighty. And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that he made them houses.

This is one of the most definitive passages in all the Word of God as it relates to the issue of resistance to ungodly rulers. These women were given a direct order by the highest ranking government authority on earth at that time. They flat out DISOBEYED. When called in to answer for their disobedience, they flat out LIED. Not only did God not punish them for their disobedience and deception, he commended them and rewarded them!

Daniel 3 chronicles the refusal of Daniel’s Hebrew friends to bow down to the golden image the king had erected. They were willing to die rather than submit to this evil decree. King Nebuchadnezzar made a decree that all his subjects in Babylon were to fall down and worship the golden image at the sound of the appointed musical signal, upon punishment of death. They refused!

When word of their refusal reached Nebuchadnezzar, he flew into a rage and called the young men in for their “misconduct.” Notice their reply:

...O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up (Dan 3:16b-18).

This courageous defiance of evil carries forward into the New Testament. The apostles were commanded by the Sanhedrin, the highest religious authority in Judah “. . . not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:18). They defied that order and kept on preaching, even though that led to their arrest and flogging. Despite their suffering, they proclaimed, “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29).

It is clear, both from the precepts of the Bible and the practices of biblical characters, that human government is not to be passively obeyed when its dictates are evil. Rather there is to be a courageous resistance to evil, even at the cost of one’s life, as in the case of most of the apostles.

As world history careens toward the end of the church age, the rapture of the church, and the establishment of the Anti-Christ system of worldwide tyranny during the Tribulation, it is critical that evangelical Christians come to a consensus regarding socio-political involvement. This consensus will increasingly involve resistance against evil, as governments move aggressively against biblical standards and those who would espouse them. ***This resistance is mandatory, regardless of one’s eschatological persuasion.*** May the examples of the saints of old form a “last days beacon” as we resist the encroaching globalist tyranny of our day. May our lives and lips proclaim, as did theirs, “We must obey God rather than men!”

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