

# The Church Before the Watching World

## “Not of This World: Pledging Allegiance To Thy Kingdom Come”

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Searcy, Arkansas  
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### Scripture Reading

*Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”*

*Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”*

*Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?”*

*Jesus answered, “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.”*

*Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?”*

*Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”*

*Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” (John 18:33-38a ESV)*

### **POLITICS**

Politics is nothing new. Three centuries before Christ came to earth, Aristotle wrote a whole book on the subject, and he used a brilliant analogy. The state, he said, is like the soul. He describes all the different parts that makes you, you. You have reason, you have spirit, and you have emotion. You have all different elements that come together to make one soul. And then he lays out what a city should look like and how a state should run its affairs—with legislators, guardians, and artisans—representing all the different parts of a city coming together to serve one whole. It’s a brilliant analogy: Aristotle is saying that politics is really just working out what is already true within

yourself.<sup>1</sup> And isn't that so true? You can tell a lot about people—who they are—by their politics.

Politics is far more than what you think about an education policy or how to interpret the commerce clause in the Constitution. Politics is how you think the world should be. It's how you order your life.

## GOD CARES ABOUT POLITICS

Throughout the Old Testament, God is intimately involved in the rise and fall of kingdoms. He even set up his own. He called his kingdom "Israel." And this wasn't a democracy. This was a "theocracy"—a political system where economic issues, social issues, and religious issues were all melded into one. You know in our country we have the president in the white house. We have congress in their own house. Both in Washington. That's where social issues get worked out. Then we have the Federal Bank reserve and Wall-Street up in New York. Then we have something like the separation of church and state—no official church anywhere dictating the official religious views for the country. And even if we did, these would be separate things all talking to each other looking for compromise to sell to the people. But in the theocracy of Israel, the white house, the senate, Wall-Street, and the state church were all in the same place—"the Temple," and, more than that, they were the same thing: the Mosaic Law of God. And God declared himself to be King.

This means that when God's people Israel went after other gods, it wasn't just a religious switch: it was a political one. It was an announcement that something or someone else was now in charge of deciding the laws of my life, and the laws of the land. When there was a complete denial of God, it was called apostasy. But more often than not, there was a blending: Give me God for my religion but give me Baal's economic policy and Asherah's social platform. The official name for that was "syncretism."

There were some things about a Theocracy that didn't transfer. For example, when God spoke against other nations, he never said to them "you should be celebrating sabbath, having feast days and regular temple worship." Those were his laws; but those were his laws for Israel. It was covenant for a kingdom. But God still owns the entire world. He made everyone in his image. And he cares about what happens in the world and how we treat one another. So, in addressing other nations, he still held them accountable to what is best termed God's "moral law," that sense of right and wrong that we all intuitively know deep within ourselves about how to treat our fellow man.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*.

We see both of these stories at work in the prophets. Israel is called to return to the Lord, to the Mosaic law of God, to following his commandments and keeping covenant, while the nations are called to account for their inhumane treatment of others. To everyone on the planet—not just to Israel—God calls for humility in leadership. He calls for accountability. He calls for justice. He cares for the poor. He wants protection for widows and orphans. He wants goodness to flourish, and he wants love to guide all our decisions.

For all these reasons and more, I can understand why Christians are drawn to politics. All the things I just mentioned are very much “political,” and they are very much on God’s interest list. If God shows interest, so should I.

Let me go one step further. As one writer has commented, I think there is a “profound and debilitating modern hubris” that sees history only as a series of failures and has nothing but ingratitude for those who went before us, working and sacrificing—however imperfectly—to give us a country which, by all objective standards, affords us more privilege and opportunity than any people in the history of the world. Do you feel that as well?<sup>2</sup>

There are Christians at every level of political leadership, and I believe a good case can be made for why that is a meaningful and rewarding job. *As long as you never confuse that with our calling.*

## THE SYNCRETIC METHOD

You see, politics isn’t just public service in the interest of protecting widows and orphans. Political lobbying alone is now a \$4 billion industry,<sup>3</sup> with people working full-time to create and promote an “us” vs. “them” view of the world. For them, politics is about winning and losing. It’s about kill or be killed. It’s about survival of the fittest.

And this is where we find the great dilemma. America has a long history of Judeo-Christian thinking. It’s in our language. It’s in the roots of our culture. You might say it’s in our DNA. We are also, at the same time, deeply pagan. Birthed in rebellion and insurrection, we have become students of Nietzsche just as much as students of Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> Chad Bird. Twitter.

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan O’Connell, “Lobbying broke all-time mark in 2021,” *Washington Post*, March 12, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/03/12/lobbying-record-government-spending/>

Think about it. In our average, daily lives, we think that people should love one another, be forgiving, and value peace. We also think that might makes right, protect yourself at all costs, and selfish greed is the path to success. This two-headed animal has existed for a long time; but we used to call it syncretism.

Nearly a century ago, a British man named Leslie Newbigin traveled to India to begin a life of mission work. Decades past before he returned home. He was shocked to discover that his beloved England had become what is known as a *post*-Christian culture. People still used the language of church, and they still lived day to day out of their inherited Christian values. But it was like the whole culture was on autopilot, enjoying the fruit of a tree that no longer had very deep roots. And Newbigin made a prediction. Humans need to worship something, he said; so, if they don't worship Jesus of Nazareth, a post-Christian culture will make politics their new religion.<sup>4</sup>

In 2018, an article appeared in *New York Magazine* with this fascinating quote. “Look at our politics,” the article began. What we have on the right and the left resemble cults with worshippers, the author noted, “practicing a religion whose followers show the same zeal as any born-again Evangelical. They are filling the void that Christianity once owned, without any of the wisdom and culture and restraint that Christianity once provided.”<sup>5</sup>

And it's not just that non-Christians have turned to religion to take the place in their lives that Christianity once occupied. Not long ago I read a book that made this bold claim: churches of the future—and in many ways, churches of today—are not grouped by theological conviction, but by political persuasion. Churches will feel affinity with each other not the carried cross, but by the ballot box. Have you found this to be shockingly accurate? I can't tell you how many conversations I have had over the last 5 years where people have left a church to join a new one, not because of theological convictions, but because they did or didn't like the politics espoused from the pulpit. I wish I could say that most of those travelers were weary of hearing political speeches. That wasn't it. They wanted to hear the rallying cry for their side and were church shopping based on party platform. Just a few months ago, a report came out that said half of self-identified Evangelicals now attend church less than once a month. So where do they gather to express what really matters to them? The same place many regular

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<sup>4</sup> For this story, see Jonathan Storment, “Carrying a Cross Through Political Crossfire,” Renew.Org. <https://renew.org/carrying-a-cross-through-political-crossfire/>

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “America's New Religions,” *Intelligencer*, Dec 7, 2018. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/12/andrew-sullivan-americas-new-religions.html>

attenders meet them: at political rallies.<sup>6</sup> Something is going on. It seems we've grown bored with the gospel and have found a much more attractive alternative.

We can test this out.<sup>7</sup> In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, people standing in line to buy bread couldn't help but discuss the pressing issue of the day: is the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper the actual body and blood of Jesus, or is it symbolic? What was a major question in the 4<sup>th</sup> century was still a major question in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The most important cultural influences in the 1400's and the 1500's were discussing and debating this, and whole churches were divided up over it.

But go online this afternoon and should your views on that subject on any platform you want. And I predict nothing bad will happen to you. You might not even get a reaction.

But get on social media and weigh in on gun control or school choice. Say your thoughts on vaccines or student loan forgiveness. How about the Presidential records act, or a certain politician's son's laptop. And you'll have more comments than you can imagine. And less friends tomorrow than you had today.

What's happening in our culture is a religious shift that goes by the name of politics. Listen to the language. Yesterday it was a crusade; today it's a culture war. We once found our talking points in Scripture and orthodox theology; now we get our marching orders from the late-night commentator of your choice, or in bullet points delivered to our inbox by the political party of your choice. And we aren't spending very much time asking the standard questions of Christian theology; we want our preachers, our Bible classes, and even our Tuesday morning coffee circle to state clearly how they see the world through the political lenses of the day. Are you a conservative or are you a liberal? Are you republican or are you democrat. If you are on the right, you feel almost a divine calling to return America to our former conservative greatness. If you are on the left, you see it as your mission to usher in a liberal era where America forces every citizen to be squeezed through the filter that produces your best guess at utopia. Either way, you can become exhausted trying to build up, tear down, maintain, or usher in a kingdom of this world. And possibly something worse.

## **THE UNHAPPY MARRIAGE OF RELIGION AND POLITICS**

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<sup>6</sup> David French's reflection based on Ryan Burge's statistical analysis post. See Cooperative Election Study. <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu>

<sup>7</sup> Bob Turner, "America's New Religion," White Station Church of Christ Facebook post, March 24, 2021.

<https://www.facebook.com/WhiteStationCoC/photos/a.583614995008067/3716059388430263/>

Let me show you a quote from a popular politician:

*“The national government will maintain and defend the foundations on which the power of our nation rests. It will offer strong protection to Christianity as the very basis of our collective morality. Today Christians stand at the head of our country. We want to fill our culture again with the Christian spirit. We want to burn out all the recent immoral developments in literature, in entertainment, and in the press—in short, we want to burn out the poison of immorality which has entered into our whole life and culture as a result of liberal excess during recent years.”<sup>8</sup>*

Does this sound good? Does it sound like someone you want to vote for? Let’s go further. Does it sound like someone whose campaign you would work for? Does it sound like a cause worth giving your life to? I only ask because it’s from a radio address given back on July 22, 90 years ago. By a young rising star named Adolf Hitler. And it worked. Germany was a democracy, and Hitler won, carrying the “Christian vote.”

Do you know what Hitler did for the people who voted him in? He outlawed pornography. He protected and promoted the religious rights of Christian churches who agreed with him, while rooting out all the others; after all, Germany was to be a *Christian* nation. And when he led his country to war—a war against the rest of the world—he framed it as a culture war, and there was one nation who went to that war with the phrase “In God We Trust” stamped on every belt buckle. It was in German.

I have lived as a church-going Christian in many states and in several countries. Here has been my experience. I have heard lots of sermons on Romans 13—that we should obey the government. We should pay our taxes. Anarchy is wrong. You should never speak ill of your country (where’s the respect for authority, after all?) and never say you are ashamed of it—all when one party held the White House. But when the other party held the White House, I heard lots of sermons from Acts 5 (“we must obey God rather than man,”) and from the prophets declaring national shame for a country that has left their first love. The truly ironic thing is that which party I’m talking about differed depending on where I was living.

## **JEROBOAM & BABEL SYNDROME**

In 1 Kings 12, Scripture tells us a revealing story about King Jeroboam. You remember: His brother Rehoboam was carrying out oppressive policies. So Jeroboam rallied the troops, declaring that 10 of the 12 tribes should secede from the union. And they did. Jeroboam became King over them, and since it was now majority rule, this Northern

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<sup>8</sup> *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler: 1922-1939*, Vol 1, ed. Norman H. Baynes (London: OUP, 1942), p. 871.

kingdom took the name Israel for themselves, forcing the other tribes to change their name to Judah. But any smart leader knows that a nation created by rebellion will always be living with the threat of rebellion. So to bolster his street cred, and to increase security and consolidate power, Jeroboam made two golden calves and placed them on either end of his kingdom. Then he called his people together and said “you’ve gone up to Jerusalem to worship long enough. You don’t need to go there any more. “Behold your gods!” If you read his speech, everything about it sounds like Aaron at the foot of Mt Sinai. Do you know what he was doing? He was creating a new national religion that was really just a thin veneer for state power; and because it used the same language as Moses, priests like Moses, festivals like Moses, it had the subtle effect of convincing the people that whatever Jeroboam wanted to do came with Divine mandate. Instead of leading his people to humbly submit to God and follow his laws, he was using the language and symbols of Israel’s God to declare the kingdom and the power and the glory belonged to the state.

Is it really a surprise that 100 years later, when Amos comes to declare God’s warning of vengeance, the chief priest of the sanctuary says to Amos “get on out of here. This is the *king’s* sanctuary, and the temple of *his* kingdom” (Amos 7:12-13). Behold the religious shift: rather than the nation serving the interests of God, the language and symbols of religion are co-opted to serve the interest of a nation.

The story of Judah fares no better. Over time, they, too, saw the overwhelming power, financial stability, and economic security of Assyria and desired to become like them. They were smart, ruthless, and powerful. And Ahaz and Manasseh wanted to be just like them. And the more they adopted the ways of Assyria, the worse the nation became.

Do you know what both nations suffered from? Babel syndrome. Seeking to make their own name great, they forgot that God promised *He* would make their name great. Trying to provide for their own security, they forgot that God was the only security blanket they would ever need.

### **EVERY TRIBE, TONGUE, AND NATION**

The good news is that the church has within our DNA the answer and antidote to Babel. What do you think? Have you found it spiritually satisfying to live with deep anxiety about what’s happening in the world around us? Is that news station that you watch religiously aiding you in developing the fruit of the Spirit? Don’t you find it spiritually exhausting keeping up with all the sordid details involved in gossip about the other side of the political aisle? Does it help you see with the eyes of Jesus, when you suddenly realize some on that side of the aisle are now sitting in church on your aisle?

Could it be that we have become “more passionate about a political party’s vision for our country than about Jesus’ vision for his kingdom?”<sup>9</sup>

Believe it or not, God doesn’t call for us to become less political. If anything, he wants us to be more political. Because the church has its own politics—the politics of Jesus. It is not a democracy; it is a benevolent dictatorship. And our God sits under no flag; he is Lord over all of them.

When I was in my early 20’s (which, yes, was over 20 years ago), I went up to Washington D.C. to try out for a youth minister position at the Arlington Church of Christ. They told me one of the most beautiful stories I’ve ever heard—but one that was hard for me to fully appreciate at the time. You see, in the mid-90’s, there was some bitter animosity in Washington as George Bush’s cabinet was being replaced by Bill Clinton’s Cabinet. It was more than parties exchanging control; the country was undergoing what many declared to be a massive cultural shift. It was hard to find common ground. And yet, on any given Sunday, right there on the second row, Colin Powell’s personal secretary sat right next to Hillary Clinton’s personal secretary—both active members of that congregation, and dear friends in the Lord.

It reminded me of a similar story. After the Civil War, there was no man living hated more by the North than Jefferson Davis. And there was no man living hated more by the South than Ulysses S. Grant. But when those men died, and the nation was struggling to enjoy any sort of reconciliation, the two widows decided to take the lead. And Varina Davis and Julia Grant became the best of friends, and sought to lead the way in uniting a bruised and battle-worn country.<sup>10</sup>

See the seeds of the kingdom of God grow in the midst of the kingdoms of the world. The kingdom of God can be found in every country, consisting of those of every tribe, tongue, and nation. Do you know what that means? The kingdom of God includes people who vote differently than you and even those who do not vote at all. The kingdom can be found among people living in communist countries, totalitarian countries, and even in democracies. When you hear that, do you honestly think that means to be a Christian, you have to become a republican or democrat first?

## **THE PRIMARY CALL OF THE CHURCH**

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<sup>9</sup> Storment, “Carrying a Cross Through Political Crossfire.”

<sup>10</sup> Joan E. Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis’ Civil War* (HUP, 2006), p. 2.



May we hear the primary call of the church.<sup>11</sup> *First, submit to the reign of God.* The kingdom of God has “invaded, but not yet eliminated” the kingdoms of the world. We will still see sin, poverty, crime, violence, suffering, and death. But like a mustard seed, the kingdom of God would take root in the most unlikely of soils and it would grow, and grow, and grow. And don’t be naive: the kingdom of God will always be a gigantic threat to the kingdoms of the world. And those of us who pledge allegiance to the kingdom of God will live by our own politics, and it will make us feel homeless, because as members of His kingdom, we don’t belong here.

The leading figures who gathered to condemn Jesus were not just the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the chief priests. Read the gospels carefully. Do you know who they collude with to get Jesus out of the way? The Herodians, the governor, and the Roman guards. Jesus was a major threat to political power; we know this, because when he was called before Pilate the charge most concerning was this one: “are you a king?”

Christians declare that Jesus is Lord; and if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar isn’t. If we give our allegiance to the Kingdom of God, then our citizenship is in heaven, and our marching orders in the world come from only one ruler. First, we submit to the reign of God.

*Second, we commit to the mission of God.* Christians are called to have tired feet. The Great commission is our commission: go into all the world, teach all nations, preach the gospel to every creature, baptize them in the name of the one and only true God whose name is Father, Son, and Spirit. Teach these disciples to obey the word of the Lord. And there is no need to chase after other gods for safety or security. For I will be with you always, even to the end of the age. We have been commissioned, and thus we are on mission, sent into the world by our Master. And what is our mission? Simply this: to proclaim good news to the poor. To proclaim liberty to the captives. To help the blind to see, to liberate those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Is this political? You bet it is. Our mission includes changing the way people see politics as we live out the politics of Jesus.

Jesus saw prostitutes and tax collectors as dinner companions. He dined with Pharisees and blessed Roman centurions. He told his followers “lift up your eyes: for the field is white with harvest.” When we lift up our eyes, what do we see? Over 40% of Americans view the opposing political party as downright evil.<sup>12</sup> That means out of the 10 people

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<sup>11</sup> See Christopher Wright, *Here Are Your Gods: Faithful Discipleship in Idolatrous Times* (IVP Academic, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> See Nathan P. Kalmoe & Lilliana Mason, “Lethal mass partisanship: Prevalence, correlates, & electoral contingencies,” APSA paper, 2018.

standing at those self-check kiosks at Wal-Mart, 4 of them are your enemy. Bob Turner, the preaching minister for White Station in Memphis adds this poignant comment: “We shouldn’t be surprised that the number of teenagers who experience depression has doubled in the past decade, and why their parents and grandparents are tragically suffering from ‘deaths of despair.’ The demand for clicks and votes has drained people of a renewing belief in a higher power. In exchange for a God who makes all things new (Rev. 21:5), we’re left with culture wars and political bargains that promise demonization, cancellation, and polarization. I’d rather have faith, hope, and love.”<sup>13</sup>

The great news is that God has provided an alternative: he calls it the church. So, let’s be the church, living out the politics of Jesus. While the rest of world lines up in lockstep behind which fear is greater and whose hate most resonates, let the church look for ways to love every neighbors as if they were ourselves. Taste and see. Watch how the declaration that Jesus is Lord can melt hearts of stone. Surrounded by voices pressuring us to see everything through an “us” vs “them” / kill or be killed lens, imagine something even more beautiful than the sirens song. Hear it, church. Hear the politics of Jesus:

“To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the supple moves of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more payback. Live generously.

“Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for *them!*

“I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You’ll never—I promise—regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we’re at our worst.

“Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don’t condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you’ll find life a lot easier.

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<https://www.dropbox.com/s/bs618kn939gq0de/Kalmoe%20%26%20Mason%20APSA%202018%20-%20Lethal%20Mass%20Partisanship.pdf?dl=0>

<sup>13</sup> Bob Turner, “America’s New Religion.”

“Give away your life; you’ll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing.” (Luke 6, MSG)

If the politics of Jesus were to invade our lives, what would be different about us? We might find that what scrolls through our news feed to be far less important to us than how we are showing Christ to our family and friends, loving like Christ to our waiters and our next door neighbors, responding like Christ to our teachers and students. And like a mustard seed, little by little, we see the kingdom of God will grow and grow in the midst of every kingdom of the world. And isn’t it glorious?