

The Role of the Church in Civil Society 2016

The Role of the Church in Civil Society June 5 – June 26: 2016 is an election year! We are surrounded by campaign ads, mud-slinging, and talk show opinions. As we witness the decline in the moral fabric of our society, many Christians wonder what role the church is called to play in this saga. Are we called to pursue legislation that upholds the values of our faith or are we to withdraw from the political and civil process in the firm belief that the realms of Church and State are separate? This four-week class is designed to seriously engage these questions and others as we learn together the role of the church in civil society.

The objective of this class is: to develop a biblical understanding of the various roles of the Church and State and sustain a kingdom-focused perspective of civil engagement. Our perspective should be shaped by eschatological revelation, and not disillusioned expectations of social progress.

Introduction: Over the course of the last three weeks we have covered a great deal of ground relating to the role of the church in civil society. By way of review, a summary will now be provided. The first week we determined that the biblical definition of a state is, “... *part of the created order invested by God with the responsibility of maintaining and upholding the divine moral law of God under which all mankind shall be judged.*” In week two, we offered a biblical definition for the church as follows: “*The Church, as the people of God, is an organism (a living body) consisting of the redeemed both visibly and invisibly for whom, through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God is proleptically present.*” We explored how the nature of God’s kingdom is already and not yet at the same time. The future has broken in upon the present and we live under the influence of both. In week three we explored the relationship between the church and the state by looking at the reality of history, as well as the scriptural basis for the ideal relationship. We concluded the following:

“If we keep before us at all times the eschatological mission of the church – as a colony of heaven living as a citizen in two worlds, two kingdoms, we will not compartmentalize the two by thinking that all that lies in the domain of the Kingdom of Heaven lies outside the domain of the natural, created world. Nor will we synthesize the two and think that we can bring the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven into the modern civil society in which we live. Instead, we will allow the Kingdom that defines us: God’s kingdom to govern our lives so that we live in the one as if we are living in the other, because in a true sense we are. To put things more simply, the Papal aspirations of the past that gave rise to the Holy Roman Empire were misguided, but so too were the attempts of the Religious Right to make our nation a Christian nation. Equally misguided is anyone who endorses a pacifistic view and claims the role of the church is to withdraw from society and from the political arena.”

This conclusion reveals that the role of the church in civil society is both one of engagement as well as one of detachment. We should engage the political process, whatever that may be, in hopes of bringing the kingdom into every aspect of our lives, and we should detach from the certain belief that our efforts will be rewarded this side of the Parousia (return of Christ) with the outcome of anything resembling a “Christian” nation. The prayers of Christ’s church should never cease to be for the fires of revival to so sweep the nation that the hearts of the multitude will be converted and know the Lord. We should “... *seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare*” (Jeremiah 29:7). We should also remember the promise that we are strangers in a strange land, and one day, God will end our exile. The return of Christ will result in the consummation of all things. Not until that day will civil society truly be redeemed. Then, will men, “*beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks...*”

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How Shall We Then Live? In the late 1970's, Francis Schaffer wrote a book and released a video series by this title with the realization that western civilization is no longer capable of offering an answer to this question. As Christians, caught in the overlap of time and eternity, we must answer this question if we are to have a meaningful influence on our society. We have defined the two entities with which we are concerned, and offered an explanation of the role of the church in society. Now it is time to answer the questions, how shall we live? Where should we exert our efforts, energy, and influence? What does Christian involvement in the political process look like? How should we vote when our options for leaders are limited? In an attempt to gently influence the search for answers to these questions, I humbly offer the following.

Part One: *The Church as a Prophetic Voice* – When we understand that the Church, as Christ's body, is sent into the world just as Christ was sent into the world by the Father (John 20:21), we have a perfect demonstration of how we should live by observing the life and teachings of Christ. Christ fulfills a three-fold function in the historical redemptive plan of God: 1) the function of prophet, 2) the function of priest, and 3) the function of king. Likewise, the Church is called to function in similar ways to the society and state in which we live ever mindful of the reality that, *"A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you"* (John 15:20). This means that the message the church has to bring is a naturally divisive one. It is divisive, because fallen man loves darkness and would rather live in the darkness, than have the light of truth expose the brokenness of our hearts, homes, and institutions.

The Church plays the role of a prophet within society, when we confront the culture and powers that be with the truth of the gospel of the kingdom. The presence of the church within a society is not enough, if that body is silent. We have all heard the quote attributed to Edmund Burke, *"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."* This is more the case with the Church. The Church is called to proclaim truth without fear or favor of man, and without checking to see if the truth spoken is politically correct or complimentary of the cultural trends of the day. To allow the cultural agenda of the fallen world to persuade the message of the Church, is to betray the Lord and Christ to whom we belong. The question remains, what should our message be? Should we start with sin and salvation? In former times, when there was a Christian consensus within our society, this might have been the correct place to begin; however, today, given the reality of the post-Christian world in which we live, we cannot begin there. We must begin with creation, and the value of man as an image bearer of God. This means we will fight for human rights more boldly than any interest group or non-governmental organization in the arena, not simply for the rights of Christians, but for the rights of all our fellow man. It also means that we have the ability to define "human rights" in a manner that is itself prophetic. The greater the disparity between the biblical definition of a "human right" and the culture's definition of a "human right" the greater will be the prophetic influence of the church in society.

Part Two: *The Church as a Priestly Function* – In many respects, the Church performs the function of priest within society as well. The Apostle Peter informs us, *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light"* (1 Peter 2:9). As those to whom the ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted (2 Corinthians 5:19), we are truly ambassadors for Christ in every realm of society. Whatever the respective vocation to which the Lord has called you, you are to function as a representative of Christ within that arena. Are you a meat man in a butcher shop? Seek to be the best meat man you can possibly be. Are you a lawyer or doctor? Seek to bring the teaching of the

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kingdom and the grace you have been shown into your practice of law or medicine. Are you a stay-at-home mother of small children? Seek to model before them in the daily running of your household the gospel of the kingdom. Are you retired and on a fixed income? Seek to spend your time and energy in such a manner that will result in the greatest impact for good in your neighborhood, city, and society.

For the Church to function as a priest in politics, means that we should pursue policy and support laws that demonstrate to a fallen world the grace that was demonstrated to us *while we were yet sinners*. Did Christ demand obedience to God's law before showing you saving grace? Then, do not expect to impose such a standard on others. I realize that the cost of living in a pluralistic society is that we must champion the rights of our fellow man to pursue all faiths or, should man so choose, none. This may be unsettling for those of us who remember a Christian consensus within this nation. However, allow me to suggest that the former Christian consensus in which to be an American and to be a Christian seemed synonymous, was simply a farce that did more to harm the prophetic and priestly functions of the church than further it. To direct all of our attention and efforts on maintaining a Christian veneer will detract from the more important role of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom so that hearts are broken and lives are changed.

Now, I am not saying that we cannot preach the gospel of the kingdom through our actions, that is actually what we *are* doing when we demonstrate support for the level of freedom that God himself gives to mankind in scripture. However, this visible demonstration must be accompanied by a faith proclaimed boldly to the hearts of our listeners whose attention we cannot gain, nor their trust, if we are intent on removing the opportunity to reject the gospel once it is shared. Such techniques are more exemplary of our adversary the devil than the gracious and loving God who makes his sun rise on the just and unjust.

Part Three: Building in Light of Eternity – The final point that needs to be made regarding how we should live addresses the expectation that many of us might be tempted to have once we begin pursuing the kingdom of God in every aspect of our lives. Since Christianity is an eschatological religion, we must look for the reward of our labors, the success of our mission beyond this life. Should Christ tarry, and those of us in this room go the way of all the earth, then it will be the task and responsibility of the next generation to work as ambassadors of the kingdom of heaven in their own time. There is no guarantee that perceived success which might ensue during our lifetime is indeed success at all. If what we labor so intently to build might be lost, then we are arguably building in vain. This awareness is perceived by those who seek to escape society and shun all civil engagement as justification for doing so; however, as we have seen in this class, such an attitude betrays the mission of the Church and the King of the Kingdom.

Leslie Newbigin, whom we have quoted often in this course, is helpful here once again. He states, "*Just as all that Jesus had done in the days of his flesh seemed on Easter Saturday to be buried in final failure and oblivion, yet was by God's power raised to new life and power again, so all the faithful labor of God's servants which time seems to bury in the dust of failure, will be raised up, will be found to be there, transfigured in the new Kingdom. Every faithful act of service, every honest labor to make the world a better place, which seemed to have been forever lost and forgotten in the rubble of history, will be seen on that day to have contributed to the perfect fellowship of God's Kingdom.*"¹ This is the hope of the Christian mission: not one hair of his Church will fall to the ground without the Father. Just as Christ rose

¹ Newbigin, Leslie. *Signs Amid the Rubble*. Pg. 47

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again from the dead, triumphant over sin, hell, and the devil, so he purchased the Consummation of all things. This world may appear to be enslaved by the evil one, but the reality of a resurrected Christ attests to the victory of God.

Conclusion: Throughout this course, I have endeavored to offer a framework for the discussion of the role of the Church in civil society. This is not a conclusive survey, and we did not have time to address every concern and aspect of the current political battle leading up to the national election this November; however, enough has been said, I trust, to allow hope its proper place in your view of things. Christians, above all people, have reason for hope. We are not alone in this life, and our efforts are an outworking of God's grace, his faithfulness to all of creation. These efforts, regardless of how feeble and forgotten by generations to come, will be remembered by God. True success will then be realized when Christ returns and his Kingdom comes in its fullness – his will is done on earth as it is in heaven.