

Church and Society: New Testament and Early Christian Considerations

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Introduction: Defining the issue

One day a passionate parishioner told me that all our problems would be solved if we would just get back to the New Testament church. I asked him which New Testament church he wanted to get back to. The Corinthian Church with immorality that would make the pagans blush? The Galatian Church that struggled with legalism? How about the Laodicean Church which Jesus threatened to spit out of his mouth? While I'm not sure he got my point, the point that I was trying to make was that churches weren't perfect in the first century any more than they are perfect in our century.

Yet, as evangelical Christians we insist that the Bible is our rule for faith and practice. That is, we always go back to the Bible as the starting point for what we believe and how we behave.

As we consider how the early Christians related to society in general and government in particular we discover a vast array of fascinating and sometimes confounding information. We could fill a lifetime of study with all there is to read and discuss yet it doesn't seem to be enough. There are so many blanks, endless unanswered questions and multiple challenges translating from ancient first century societies to modern 21st-century societies. Nevertheless, the study is necessary and important for us to live out biblical Christian faith in our own generation.

We begin by revisiting some of the biblical texts and then by examining some of the ways that the early centuries church applied biblical teaching to their relationship to government and society. From this we hope to start a list of principles for us today.

Biblical teaching

The relationship of disciples to government was a frequent issue for Jesus and his followers. Jesus attracted a diverse lot. For example, Matthew was a tax collector who worked as an agent of the Roman government which had conquered the Hebrew people and occupied the land of Israel with brutal military force. Also in the list of Jesus' closest disciples was Simon the Zealot. This meant more than that he was a zealous enthusiastic man. "Zealot" referred to his political affiliation. He belonged to an underground insurrectionist group committed to the overthrow of the Roman government and pledged to murder every Roman possible and any Jew who collaborated with the Roman government.

When Cornelius became the first Gentile convert to Christianity (Acts 10) the early church faced the monumental question of what changes were required to be a follower of Jesus. They decided that he could be an uncircumcised Gentile Roman and still be a Christian. Apparently they also decided that he could remain an officer in the Roman army.

Jesus came into a politically polarized world. In many ways he was apolitical, often to the frustration of those who wanted him to advocate for their positions. Jesus preached a radical allegiance to God and to the kingdom of heaven. His followers were to identify first of all and most of all as citizens of heaven and to live by the revolutionary ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' kingdom cut across the political and social distinctions of Roman, Greek, Gentile, Jew, slave, free, male and female. It was a breathtaking new agenda with the goal of doing God's will on earth as it is done in heaven.

Throughout subsequent history some Christians have been so drawn to this call to a radical new way of living that they have turned their idealism into utopianism. They have mimicked the Essenes of Jesus' day and established isolated theocracies free of external centralized governments and pagan societies. It hasn't worked well.

Perhaps the most famous of Jesus' teachings about faith and government is the story about taxes in Matthew 22. The chapter begins with one of Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of heaven, who is in and who is not.

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away (Matt. 22:15-22).

The usual takeaway from this story is a separation of church and state. Give the government the coin with Caesar's image and give to God our lives with God's image. However, there is another subtlety woven into what Jesus said. Regardless of the range of politics among Jesus' critics, they quickly had access to the coin of the realm. Jews who adamantly opposed any graven image used coins with Caesar's image to buy their goods, conduct their business and pay their taxes. They and Jesus pragmatically recognized that they were interconnected with the government whether they liked it or not.

Based on the reality that Christians cannot escape from government and society, later New Testament writers elaborate on how believers are to relate to society and government where they live. And, beyond the inability to escape the realities of government and society, Paul and Peter argue that Christians should live out the kingdom of God through the best and worst circumstances. We are primarily citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20) but also citizens of our government.

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor (Rom. 13:1-7).

Paul presents a surprisingly positive view of government authority. Government leaders are agents of God and Christians are to submit to their rule as an expression of discipleship. This includes paying taxes which may underwrite inappropriate government actions.

Obviously, this cannot be a call to absolute obedience. Peter later explains that the Christian slave, who is to submit to his or her master just as all Christians are to submit to the government authorities, may have to disobey in order to do God's good. In this circumstance, Peter says that when "you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God" (2 Pet. 2:20). Likewise, the Jerusalem

Church chose disobedience when instructed against teaching in Jesus' name, concluding, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

But under most circumstances the Christian is to "do what is right" with the expectation of commendation from ruling authorities. It appears that there is a very high threshold of submission and that disobedience is to be the rare exception rather than the rule.

Peter calls for submission to government authorities without much leeway for exceptions:

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king (2 Pet. 2:13-17).

Emphasis on the New Testament teachings for Christians to submit to government authority must not be separated from the manner in which this submission is offered. Paul wrote to Titus that he should "remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate and to show true humility toward all men" (Titus 3:1-2). We are to pray "for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim. 2:2). Our trustworthiness should be so obvious to the government and everyone else that we don't need to take oaths but our simple "Yes" or "No" is completely dependable (James 5:12).

As we read New Testament teachings, the picture becomes clear. Christians are to live out the kingdom of heaven in the kingdoms of earth. We are to demonstrate what a Christ-follower believes and does even in a pagan culture. In the words of the modern theologian Karl Barth, we are to be the provisional representatives of the new humanity. Or, as Paul tells it, "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27).

But, the difficulty is in the details.

Early Church in the Roman Empire

The first three centuries of the church brought Christian teaching into daily engagement with Roman realities. Followers of Jesus genuinely sought to live out what the Bible teaches. Some were stunningly

successful. Many struggled. Some tragically failed. Many died as martyrs. God blessed and sustained the church so that it not only survived but thrived.

We look back almost two millennia and seek to learn from those early Christians. But it is not easy to translate their stories into our situations.

For me, there is a significant sociological and historical consideration that must not be overlooked. During the first, second and third centuries Christians were a minority. Their relationship to the culture and government was politically weak if not powerless. Most Christians were subjects not citizens. Probably, most were slaves. Probably, most were women. Probably, most were poor. Paul's exercise of his rights as a Roman citizen was commendable but very rare. Few Christians could stand tall in a Roman court or appeal their cases to Caesar.

Initially, Christianity was considered to be a sect of Judaism. The Jews may have separated themselves from the Christians fairly quickly but it took longer for the government to figure out the distinction. Generally, the Roman government allowed local religions and customs to continue as long as they did not disrupt the peace or usurp Roman authority. Jews were spread across the empire, had synagogues in major cities, served in the Roman army¹ and were tolerated as a religious minority. As a sect of Judaism, Christians were tolerated and often misunderstood. Confusion arose as non-Jews became Christians, Jews increasingly distinguished themselves from Christians and Christians grew in numbers.

The Roman government had growing animosity toward Christians beginning in the second half of the first century and peaking in the third century.

An historic date was July 19, AD 64. The city of Rome burned with a vengeance. With narrow streets and multi-storied wooden tenements it was a tinderbox ready for devastation by the flames. The city burned non-stop for three days and three nights. After 72 hours the fires finally slowed down only to break out with even greater ferocity. Some of the most famous and fabulous landmarks of the empire's capital city were forever destroyed. Many lost their lives and much of the city's large population was left homeless.

Among the people of Rome there was little doubt who was responsible. They blamed their emperor, Nero. It was said that he was a builder and wanted to rebuild Rome to his own design and to make himself forever famous. Rumors had it that he ordered his soldiers to block the fire fighters and to reset the flames when they started to burn out. Resentment and animosity against Nero was huge. The people were turning against him and his leadership.

Nero needed someone else to blame, and he chose to blame the Christians. Up until then Christianity was considered a denomination of Judaism and thereby had legal protection under Roman law. But there were rumors and allegations against the followers of Jesus—they were accused of cannibalism because of secret meetings where they were said to eat the body and drink the blood of their leader; they were accused of sexual orgies because of their claim to specially love one another; they were accused of opposing family values because new converts were more loyal to their Lord than to their parents and family.

So, Nero seized on popular misunderstandings and prejudice and announced that the Christians had burned the city. He authorized and ordered broad and severe persecution and punishment.

The Roman historian Tacitus reported that a multitude of Christians suffered and died horrible deaths. Nero ordered that Christians be covered with the skins of animals and that the skins be sown tight—then wild dogs were sent to attack them and tear them to death; other Christians were nailed to crosses and publicly crucified; large numbers of Christians were covered with pitch and set on fire as human torches to light Nero's gardens throughout the night. The worst of criminals felt compassion for the Christians because their treatment was more severe than any criminal received.

Stories like this about persecution and martyrdom may give the impression that there was constant wholesale slaughter of Christians for the first centuries of the church. It really wasn't like that. Persecution was erratic and often limited to certain regions. And many times the government was protective of Christians.

Rome wanted peace and loyalty. The government was suspicious of secret meetings and potential treason. Christians practiced what the Romans considered to be strange if not dangerous rituals. They pledged their highest loyalty to the Christ rather than to the Caesar.

They conducted private meetings where they were rumored to practice cannibalism. They were often accused of atheism because they didn't believe in the traditional Roman pantheon.

Most of the legal action against Christians was not because of religious beliefs but because of accusations that they broke laws. Emperors insisted that the Christians be tried on the basis of evidence proving their crimes and not because of their religious beliefs. When Nero martyred Christians it was because he said they were arsonists not because they believed in Jesus as the Savior. Sometimes the government helped Christians when soldiers broke up riots against believers and applied the Roman rule of law for their protection.ⁱⁱ

As the number of Christians increased and public opinion turned against them there was growing pressure on the emperors to insist on complete loyalty and to punish those who refused. In AD 111 Trajan required an empire-wide loyalty oath which was documented by certificates (*libelli*). Some Christians refused and were punished by the government. Some complied and then faced church discipline. But, overall, it was only the small beginning of problems between the church and government. It wasn't until the mid-third century that persecutions became severe. Decius attempted to eliminate all Christians in AD 250. Valerian and Diocletian also ordered broad persecutions. None worked. There were martyrdoms, some recantations but mostly an increased solidarity and determination among the followers of Jesus. Growing persecution strengthened and grew the church.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is no record of Christians serving in the Roman army prior to AD 170-180, leading to the conclusion that the early Christians were pacifists.^{iv} However, by the early fourth century, only Christians were allowed to serve in the Roman army. According to ethicist James D. Douglas, "Some of the early church fathers (Hippolytus, Tertullian, Lactantius) were clearly pacifists, perhaps because a soldier in the Roman armies was exposed to pagan rites and swore allegiance to the emperor, thus clashing with his overriding loyalty to Christ. But weighty authorities on the other side—notably Clement of Alexandria—were convinced that the soldier who was converted should remain where he was."^v

As differences and misunderstandings of Christianity developed there were Apologists who wrote lengthy treatises to the government to explain and defend Christians. They became popular among Christians and are still read today by modern believers, but there is little evidence that they were read by government leaders or that they had much influence.^{vi}

Rodney Stark's book *The Rise of Christianity* gives a fascinating overview of Roman government and society and how Christians lived through those early centuries of the church.^{vii}

1. The Roman Empire was a pagan place. Christian values were little known or followed. Roman religion promoted a whole pantheon of gods and idols. Immorality was part of official worship. Dishonesty in business was normal. Violence was everywhere. Marital morality was minimal. Divorce or abandonment was frequent.
2. Cities were filthy and dangerous. Life expectancy was less than half of today's in modern America. Virtually every family had children die and half the children lost at least one parent before reaching maturity.
3. Modern birth control methods were unknown. Abortion was far more common than today in America. Because medical procedures were primitive, germ theory was unknown, soap had not been

invented and antibiotics were not available—infection frequently left women infertile or dead.

4. Infanticide was common. Newborn babies were left outside to die of exposure. Almost all infanticide was against females. They waited to see if the baby was a boy or a girl. Boy babies were valued and girl babies were abandoned. The long-term results on society were enormous with adult men significantly outnumbering women.

5. Epidemics swept through Roman cities—smallpox, measles, bubonic plague—killing up to half of the population.

6. When cities were depopulated by plagues and fires the government forced people to relocate from other parts of the empire. Tens of thousands were brought to repopulate cities—people from so many languages that they could barely communicate with one another.

7. In the midst of all this the Bible called on followers of Jesus Christ to be holy. Around AD 67 Peter wrote:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Pet. 2:9-12).

How then did Christians live as the opposition increased?

In those early centuries holy Christians lived moral lives in a pagan culture. Husbands and wives were faithful to each other. They avoided divorce. Women were treated with dignity and respect. They didn't have abortions. They kept, loved and nurtured their girl babies. They found abandoned girls and adopted them into their families.

Pagans married young. There was such a shortage of women that some girls were kept inside all their lives to avoid kidnapping. Many were forced into marriage as young as 11 or 12 years old. Christians insisted that their girls wait until they were 18 or 20 to marry and that they be virgins.

While the pagan world had a shortage of women the church had plenty. The church increasingly cornered the female market. As a result huge numbers of pagan men started showing up at church. But the church wouldn't allow marriages between believers and unbelievers so men by the thousands converted from paganism to Christianity.

When the plagues hit cities the pagans ran away to the mountains or the seashore. They often left behind their elderly, disabled and very young family members. The Christians stayed and cared for those whom the pagans abandoned. Often this cost them their lives. When the pagans returned they found that their relatives had been loved into Christian faith.

When slaves and others were forced to repopulate cities the Christians welcomed them into their homes and churches. It became widely known that the church was a safe place where you could get food, clothing, help and love. Thousands more came to Christian faith.

The long-term results of holy living were amazing. I always thought that the Roman Empire became Christian because of the Edict of Milan issued by the Emperor Constantine in AD 313. He had entered into battle with *Chi Rho* (the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ) and won, leading him to convert to Christianity. Stark documents that something quite different happened. The emperor had no choice. There were so many Christians he had to declare Christianity a legal religion of the empire.

◆ AD 40	1,000 Christians	17/1000 th of 1% of population
◆ AD 200	218,000 Christians	36/100 th of 1 % of population
◆ AD 350	33.9 million Christians	56.5% of population

How did these Christians do it? They lived holy lives--as aliens and strangers in the world, they abstained from sinful desires and lived such good lives among the pagans that, though they were accused of doing wrong, the pagans saw their good deeds. They glorified God.

Conclusion

My assignment for the study conference was to start the conversation around the Bible and the early centuries. Others are going to tackle the challenges of moving from the early church to the 21st-century church. As that journey begins, I share a few observations from the past to consider for today.

- 1. The New Testament doesn't teach a governmental ideal.** The first century setting was a failed monarchy in Israel and an Imperial dictatorship in Rome. As we base our consideration of the relationship of Christians to society and government it is not to inaugurate a biblical ideal but to

translate biblical principles into government by monarchy, republic, oligarchy, democracy or even anarchy.

2. The biblical emphasis is on peace and justice rather than on which government best facilitates peace and justice.

3. The Christian's first and absolute loyalty is to Jesus Christ and his kingdom and not to any human ruler, government, nation, political party or political ideology. Whether in the first century or the 21st century, Christians are to join our voices in saying, "Jesus is Lord!"

4. Biblical change in society comes primarily through holy living and the power of God and not through political power. That is not to say that we should not cooperate with and take advantage of government, as did Paul with the privileges of Roman citizenship, but our ultimate faith is in God, not government.

5. The New Testament approaches government from a minority perspective. Christians did not think or act as if they were in charge. Our notion of government influence through political process would have been an alien concept to the early church. It is very different and very challenging for those who have historically been a powerless minority to come to positions of power and governance. We can criticize, idealize and behave more idiosyncratically when we are a misunderstood minority. It is quite different when we take responsibility. Many do not do it well. The church has often failed when it seeks to take charge of government.

6. Early Christians exhibited enormous faith and confidence in God. They were willing to die for their faith and values with the conviction that God would ultimately prevail.

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ⁱ There are different views of the history of Jews serving in the Roman army. Some insist that Jews refused conscription because of pagan rituals, swearing oaths of allegiance to Caesar, dietary restrictions and keeping the Sabbath. The Romans did allow some exceptions to conscription although there is no evidence of a blanket exception for all Jews. There are documented examples of Jews from Alexandria and elsewhere in the Roman army (e.g., Tiberius Julius Alexander who was born to Jewish parents and became a Roman general). One of the

historical challenges in determining how many Jews served in the army is that many Jews apparently bore Greek and Roman names, making them indistinguishable from non-Jews in historical records.

ⁱⁱ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959, pages 43-45.

ⁱⁱⁱ C. Harold King, *A History of Civilization*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964, page 219.

^{iv} J.D. Weaver, "Pacifism," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, editor, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984, page 813.

^v James D. Douglas, "Pacifism," *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973, page 481.

^{vi} Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959, pages 45-47.

^{vii} Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, Princeton University Press, 1996.