



The Fourth of July God, America, and You

Key Passage

1 Peter 2:16-17 (NASB)

¹⁶ *Act as free people, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bond-servants of God.* ¹⁷ Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

This week we celebrate the 4th of July, otherwise known as Independence Day, the birthday of our great nation, the United States of America. As of this date, it has been 246 years since our forefathers fought for American independence against the British Empire and succeeded in establishing the greatest country in human history. The American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence have proven to be incredibly durable documents whose precepts have defined the trajectory of the modern western world since their composition.

As America celebrates its birthday once again, it is an appropriate time to discuss what it means to be a Christian living in America. Today, this question is more important than ever as our country becomes increasingly polarized due to increasingly controversial political and social issues. From a national perspective, we are faced with the question: what is America *really* and what do we want America to *be*? Further, how should Christians view the American experiment and engage in civil discourse? Is there a right side to the culture war that Christians should take?



2 Peter is a letter written by the apostle Peter to Christians living in various parts of the Roman empire amid persecution, struggling to remain faithful to Christ while considering their allegiance to the Roman government. Peter's writings will provide some helpful answers.

BELONG

Start the group with an opportunity for community. We want this to be a place where the body of Christ can **belong** by sharing their lives with one another in genuine fellowship.

- How is everyone's week going? Life updates?
- What is something we can be praying about this week?
- What is something we can praise this week?

- When you think of America, what comes to mind? Is your image of America good or bad? Why?
- What do you make of the political and social issues faced by America today? Does the Bible provide any guidance on how to proceed?



BELIEVE

Move into the relevant Bible passages and read along together. This is where the body of Christ can learn together to **believe** in Jesus more and love Him better.

Two Extremes

- **God and Country Conflation**
- **Pious Rejection of all Patriotism**

In this conversation, it is important to recognize that we tend to move towards one of two extremes when we bring together our faith and civics.

To conflate God with country is to view American ideals as Christ's ideals. Although America was founded on Judeo-Christian principles, it does not follow that America is a perfect reflection of biblical values. It is self-evident historically that God has blessed the United States and used it as an instrument to bless the world in turn, but America's national interests do not always align with God's. Further, to see the mission of God as nationally achievable is to view Christianity as most effective when it is exercised as a political force.

In response to this conflation among some Christians, many in the church 'piously' reject patriotism altogether for fear of worshiping America rather than God. This commonly manifests itself as a lack of appreciation for the good America has accomplished, focusing rather on America's past sins and inadequacies. Although it is true that our first love must be Christ, this does not mean it is wrong to love America for what God has worked through her. The unfortunate consequence of fully rejecting American patriotism is to discount how participation in America's institutions can bear good fruit for the world.

What then is the solution to this conundrum? How can Christians avoid the two extremes? Can we truly honor God and love our country at the same time? The answer is a resounding yes! The answer lies in understanding that our allegiance as Christians lies within another kingdom altogether, the kingdom of Christ, and it is our loyalty to this kingdom that informs how we live in our earthly nation.



Allegiance to the Kingdom of God

1 Peter 2:9-11 (NASB)

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for *God's* own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰ for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹ Beloved, I urge *you* as foreigners and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul. ¹² Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe *them*, glorify God on the day of visitation.

As Christians, our primary allegiance is to the kingdom of God, where Christ is our king. Rather than an earthly nation, we are members of what Peter calls a 'chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.' This is why Peter refers to Christians as 'foreigners and strangers;' our true home is in Heaven above, not earth below. Until God calls us home, we are but exiles in a foreign land that await the return of the one true king, Jesus Christ.

Admittance into this kingdom is not earned or merited, but the result of Christ's purchasing us through His death on the cross and resurrection. In other words, no one is a natural born citizen of Heaven; we are granted citizenship through God's grace. For this reason, Peter says that 'you were once not a people.' Keep in mind that Peter's audience, Roman citizens, were primarily Gentile. The Jews had been God's people for hundreds of years and received the benefits of heavenly citizenship through their obedience to God's Law. Through Christ, Gentiles have been grafted into this family, having now 'received mercy' where we had not yet before.

Because Christians are representatives of God's kingdom, it is even more important that we live righteous lives according to God's Word, abstaining from 'fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul.' Instead, we are to 'keep our behavior excellent among the Gentiles.' The world is inherently hostile to the church because they are not of the light, but of the darkness, choosing to 'slander us as evildoers' to convince themselves of their own righteousness and sufficiency apart from Christ. However, Peter's admonition to live righteously amidst unbelievers is to be a witness to them. There is hope that through our faithful conduct the unrepentant will come to 'glorify God,' coming to a saving faith in Christ and joining His heavenly kingdom.

Where does this leave us when it comes to the United States of America and our earthly citizenship within its borders?



To Submit and Honor Authority

1 Peter 2:13-17 (NASB)

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. ¹⁵ For such is the will of God, that by doing right you silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ *Act* as free people, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but *use it* as bond-servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

Alliance to the kingdom of God requires obedience and submission to the kingdoms of this earth according to the Bible. Peter's words echo that of Paul in his letter to the Romans, where he explains that "there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." Because God has sovereignly appointed world governments, it is for 'the Lord's sake' that we 'submit ourselves... to every human institution.'

Why has God placed human rulers over us? Once again taking his cue from Paul, Peter explains that whether it be kings or governors, they have been 'sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.' In other words, God has granted government authority on earth to be keepers and guardians of His moral law. Their objective is to reward good and punish evil according to the laws they have set in place. Therefore, we should not fear submission to authority because, as Paul explains, 'rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil.' Because the government acts in God's stead to establish just laws, obeying the Lord should not get us in trouble with them.

As it must already be clear, government does not usually uphold the responsibilities of its God given role. Rather, what we typically find are governing authorities that reject God and His law, choosing to establish their own in His place. Our rulers seek their own glory rather than God's, and do not rightly divide between the good and the bad as God demands. What then is the Christian's response? Paul and Peter do not make any qualification for civil obedience; in all circumstances, we are to submit ourselves to human institutions. Peter says, 'For such is the will of God, that by doing right you silence the ignorance of foolish people.' We are living sacrifices, and our very lives, especially in the face of persecution, should point the lost back to Christ.

In Peter's day, Christians lived under the tyranny of Caesar, yet Jesus commanded His followers to 'Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's' all the same. Christians in the first century were good citizens, who paid their taxes, served their society, and respected authority. Our default position as citizens of God's kingdom is to honor our earthly kingdom. How can we do this when the world around us seems so dark? Peter admonishes us to 'Act as free people, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bond-servants of God.' He does not speak of freedom in the sense of religious and personal liberty as we typically conceive it as Americans; rather, it



is our freedom found in Christ that empowers us to live just lives despite our less-than-ideal circumstances. We possess eternal security, so rather than abusing the forgiveness we've been given to do evil, we should face adversity perpetuated by government with hope.

Being a Good Citizen

Peter's council in his second epistle provides the necessary foundation to inquire further about America and the church's place in it. In summation, we are citizens of Christ's kingdom first, and citizens of America second. We are commanded by God to submit to America's authority and respect our institutions as a witness to the true freedom we have in Christ. The freedom given to us by America is but a faint shadow of the freedom we have in Jesus.

However, what must be emphasized, for fear of being forgotten, is that the Bible commands us to be *good citizens* of whatever country we live in. This may sound simple, but what does it actually mean to be a *good* citizen? So far, being a good citizen appears to boil down to being obedient to the governing authority regardless of how it operates. However, this submission does indeed have a limit. When government fails its mission to uphold God's law on His behalf, we have an obligation as Christians to speak out against it. Although the Bible does not call for violent revolution, it does allow for the Christian to disobey government on the grounds that such government requires something of us that is in opposition to God's law.

In the book of Acts, the apostles declare that "We must obey God rather than men" when ordered by their government to do something that goes against God's commands. It is because of Christ's authority that we submit to government, but it is *also* by Christ's authority that we can, in good conscience, disobey government when appropriate. Although this will require suffering the consequences, proper biblical submission to authority does not entail blind allegiance. Rather, the implication of the text is that we can only submit to authority *given* that the authority fulfills its role.

Do Christians then have any responsibility or agency as it pertains to establishing and maintaining just government? Absolutely! In fact, the Bible lays the groundwork for understanding what a godly society looks like. Before the church, Israel stood alone as God's chosen people; more importantly, they were an actual nation who ordered themselves around civil laws and ordinances. Ergo, God *does* reveal to some extent what a godly nation should look like. Further, many of the narratives of the Old Testament provide insight into how we as Christians should rightly participate in our system of government.

A false dichotomy has been drawn between our faith world and the secular world, as though our relationship with Jesus is not meant to mix with our civil obligations. The truth is that Scripture guides the Christian in all areas of life, including politics. More importantly, the Gospel's power is meant to transform every part of our world, including our government and institutions! Although it is true that the Gospel message is not political, nor is furthered by political means, the truth of God's Word has clear implications for our civil system, how it should be run, and how we relate to it.



America and Her Destiny

America finds herself in a moment of unprecedented turmoil. Although the United States does not find itself at war, the cultural, social, and political issues plaguing our society run the danger of eroding the very foundations of American civilization. As Christians, this should be concerning because, despite her many undeniable flaws, America has stood as a beacon of light promoting Judeo-Christian principles and ensuring a better, fairer, and freer world for all people.

The church's purpose is to spread the Gospel to a broken America that desperately needs it above all else. Only the message of Christ crucified and risen from the grave can change the hearts of men that have become so darkened through sin. As conditions within the United States continue to decline, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Christians will find themselves in an all too familiar situation: suffering under direct government persecution.

The apostles in their day rejoiced because 'they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name,' the name of Christ. In the same way, we should have no fear of persecution because God has placed us in this nation at this critical juncture to be His witnesses. He has considered us worthy of the task to endure suffering so that the lost may be reached, and we must as the church rise to the occasion.

However, although the church thrives historically in times of persecution, that does not mean we should seek to *be* persecuted. In other words, insofar as it depends on us, we as Christians should seek to uphold a righteous and just society according to the council of the Word of God. As Americans, we have the privilege of voting for our leaders in free and open elections. These leaders are not inconsequential, as they will determine laws on both a state and national level, and these laws affect the lives of all people for better or for worse.

It is not the place of the church to determine for any Christian how to vote, or how best to participate in our government. However, it is the place of the church to help guide Christians to make informed decisions concerning their participation within government. Above all else, Christians must do what they believe is individually right; but they are also obligated to support a system that stands for the things of God to the best of its ability.

Our politics are not our own. We do not get to choose based on our own whims who should lead, but rather our choice must be subordinated to the will of God. It is our responsibility to know the Scriptures, and to make choices within civil discourse that reflect a right understanding of God's wisdom surrounding significant issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and transgenderism. No system of government is perfect, nor is any President. However, given that we live in a broken and sinful world, whereby our choices will not always be born-again believers, we must make do with what we have been given, and make the best choice given the available options.



BECOME

Wrap up the discussion by asking some closing questions. We can **become** more like the people God is calling us to be by reflecting on what we've learned and applying it.

- How does our allegiance to Christ's kingdom inform our allegiance to our nation?
 - What is the purpose of submitting to the governing authorities?
- How does the Bible describe how our government is supposed to act?
 - Is there a limit to our submission to the government?
 - If so, what does proper civil disobedience look like?
- Does the Gospel have anything to do with politics?
 - How should our faith in the Word of God inform our voting decisions?
 - Is it ever possible for one political side to be better than another for a Christian?