**This Is No Time for Retreat:**

**Christians must still seek to change the courts and the laws**

**as a crucial component of influencing the culture**

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**A. Some voices today are telling us to tone it down, stop trying to influence politics so much**

**Their trumpet is sounding “Retreat!”**

James Davison Hunter, To Change the World (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2010) says to evangelicals:

it is essential, in my view, to abandon altogether talk of “redeeming the culture,” “advancing the kingdom,” “building the kingdom,” “transforming the world,” “reclaiming the culture,” and “changing world.” Christians need to leave such language behind them because it carries too much weight. It implies conquest, takeover, or dominion, which in my view is precisely what God does not call us to pursue – at least not in any conventional, 20th or 21st century way of understanding these terms (p. 280).

*It may be that the healthiest course of action for Christians . . . is to be silent for a season and learn how to enact their faith in public through acts of shalom rather than to try again to represent it publicly through law, policy, and political mobilization* (p. 281, italics in original).

David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity… And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007):

[In our national surveys we found the three most common perceptions of present-day Christianity are anti-homosexual (an image held by 91% of young outsiders), judgmental (87%), and hypocritical (85%). (p. 25)]

Christians are now perceived among Mosaics and Busters [16-29-year-olds] as too involved in politics. To be more precise, they think of us as motivated primarily by political goals and as promoting a right-wing agenda (p. 152).

75% of outsiders aged 16 to 29 think Christians are “too involved in politics” (p. 26).

**B. But Scripture encourages us to influence even secular governments for good**

**1. Old Testament examples**

Gen 41:40 Joseph – 2nd in authority over all Egypt

Dan 4:27: Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.”

[Jer 29:7: But 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.]

Neh 1:11: Now I was cupbearer to the king. (Arataxerexes – Persia, 445 BC)

Esther – influence on Ahashuerus

Est 10:3 “Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus”

I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame (Psa 119:46)

See also: Isaiah 13-23; Ezekiel 25-32; Amos 1-2; Obadiah; Jonah; Nahum; Habakkuk 2; Zephaniah 2; Genesis 41:37-45; 42:6; 45:8-9, 26; Exodus 8:1

**2. New Testament examples**

Lk 3:18-20: So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

Ac 24:24-25: After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment (διαλεγομένου δὲ αὐτοῦ περὶ δικαιοσύνης καὶ ἐγκρατείας καὶ τοῦ κρίματος τοῦ μέλλοντος ), Felix was alarmed and said, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.”

And why are the passages on civil authorities in Rom 13 and 1 Pet 2 in Scr, if not to instruct people in God’s will and purpose for civil governments?

**C. Christians have influenced governments positively throughout history**

**1. Examples**

Historian Alvin Schmidt points out how the spread of Christianity and Christian influence on government was primarily responsible for

outlawing infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion in the Roman Empire (in AD 374);**[[1]](#footnote-1)**

outlawing the brutal battles-to-the-death in which thousands of gladiators had died (in 404);**[[2]](#footnote-2)**

granting of property rights and other protections to women;**[[3]](#footnote-3)**

banning polygamy (which is still practiced in some Muslim nations today);**[[4]](#footnote-4)**

prohibiting the burning alive of widows in India (in 1829);**[[5]](#footnote-5)**

outlawing the painful and crippling practice of binding young women’s feet in China (in 1912);**[[6]](#footnote-6)**

During the history of the church, Christians have had a decisive influence in opposing and often abolishing slavery in the Roman Empire, in Ireland, and in most of Europe**[[7]](#footnote-7)**

In England, William Wilberforce, a devout Christian, led the successful effort to abolish the slave trade and then slavery itself throughout the British Empire by 1840.**[[8]](#footnote-8)**

In the United States, though there were vocal defenders of slavery among Christians in the South, they were vastly outnumbered by the many Christians who were ardent abolitionists, speaking, writing, and agitating constantly for the abolition of slavery in the United States. Schmidt notes that two-thirds of the American abolitionists in the mid–1830s were Christian clergymen,**[[9]](#footnote-9)**

The American civil rights movement that resulted in the outlawing of racial segregation and discrimination was led by Martin Luther King Jr., a Christian pastor, and supported by many Christian churches and groups.**[[10]](#footnote-10)**

There was also strong influence from Christian ideas and influential Christians in the formulation of the Magna Charta in England (1215)**[[11]](#footnote-11)** and of the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution (1787)**[[12]](#footnote-12)** in the United States. These are three of the most significant documents in the history of governments on the earth, and all three show the marks of significant Christian influence in the foundational ideas of how governments should function.

Today: FRC, many state family policy councils, ADF, etc – carrying on the same tradition, in obedience to Scripture and to God’s calling

Therefore I cannot agree with

John MacArthur when he says, “God does not call the church to influence the culture by promoting legislation and court rulings that advance a scriptural point of view.”**[[13]](#footnote-13)**

When I look over that list of changes in governments and laws that Christians incited, I think God *did* call the church and thousands of Christians within the church to work to bring about these momentous improvements in human society throughout the world. Or should we say that Christians who brought about these changes were *not* doing so out of obedience to God? That these changes made *no difference* to God? This cannot be true.

MacArthur says, “Using temporal methods to promote legislative and judicial change … is not our calling—and has no eternal value.”**[[14]](#footnote-14)**

I disagree. I believe those changes listed above were important to the God who declares, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). God *cares* how people treat one another here on earth, and these changes in government listed above *do* have eternal value in God’s sight.

Christians realized that if they could influence laws and governments for good, they would be obeying the command of their Lord, “Let your light shine before others, so that they *may see your good works* and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

These good works in the political realm *give glory to our Father in heaven*, and so they help to fulfill the purpose for which the universe was made – to glorify God. (That is why we want people to be saved – so that they will glorify God – that is putting points on the eternal scoreboard.)

**D. Objections**

**1. “We have to change the culture before we can change the laws and the courts.”**

Sometimes evangelical Christians discourage those who are active in influencing politics by saying this is a hopeless task unless we first change the culture, because the prevailing opinions in the culture determine the outcome of elections, determine the ways that politicians will vote, and then determine decisions of our judicial system.

My response is to say that we must do both, but we must not give up the crucial task of influencing politics and laws as we are able to do so. And political decisions made by legislatures, and court rulings, certainly influence culture. For example, the you woefully mistaken 1971 Supreme Court decision, *Lemon V Kurzman*, decreed that government actions must not have the effect of supporting or opposing “religion” – not one specific religion like the Episcopal Church or the Presbyterian Church or the Roman Catholic Church, but religion in general! This was something the First Amendment never intended, but it became the law of the land. The result was that we have had nearly 50 years of students throughout elementary school and high school getting an education about all of life that by law excludes any mention of accountability to God for our moral actions. This has had a profoundly detrimental effect on our culture

***2. But doesn’t the Bible say that persecution is coming?***

Sometimes people ask me, “Why should we try to improve governments when the Bible tells us that persecution is coming in the end times before Christ returns? Doesn’t that mean that we should expect governments to become more and more anti-Christians?” (The have in mind passages like Matt. 24:9–12, 21–22; 2 Tim. 3:1–5.)

The answer is that we cannot know when Christ will return or when the events preceding his coming will occur (see Matt. 24:36; 25:13). What we do know is that while we have opportunity, God tells us not to give up but to go on preaching “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) and doing “good works” (Eph. 2:10) and loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:39).

🡪 That means we should go on *trying to influence governments for good* as long as we are able to do so.

If all the Christians who influenced governments for good in previous centuries had just given up and said, “Persecution is coming and governments will become more evil, so there is nothing we can do,” then none of those good changes in laws would have come about.

***3. But won’t political involvement distract us from the main task of preaching the Gospel?***

At this point someone may object that while political involvement may have *some* benefits and may do *some* good, it can so easily distract us, turn us away from the church, and cause us to neglect the main task of pointing people toward personal trust in Christ. John MacArthur writes, “When the church takes a stance that emphasizes political activism and social moralizing, it always diverts energy and resources away from evangelization.”**[[15]](#footnote-15)**

Yet the proper question is not, “Does political influence take resources away from evangelism?” but, “Is political influence something God has called us to do?” If God has called some of us to some political influence, then those resources would not be blessed if we diverted them to evangelism—or to the choir, or to teaching Sunday School to children, or addiction recovery ministries, or to any other use.

God may call *individual Christians* to different emphases in their lives. This is because God has placed in the church “varieties of gifts” (1 Cor. 12:4) and the church is an entity that has “many members” but is still “one body” (v. 12).

“But if Jim places all his attention on the sound system, won’t that distract the church from the main task of preaching the Gospel?” No, not at all. That is not what God has called Jim to emphasize (though he will certainly share the Gospel with others as he has opportunity). Jim’s exclusive focus on the church’s sound system means he is just being a faithful steward in the responsibility God has given him.

But *the whole ministry of the church* will include both emphases. And the teaching ministry from the pulpit should do nothing less than proclaim “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). It should teach, over the course of time, on all areas of life and all areas of Bible knowledge. That certainly must include, to some extent, what the Bible says about the purposes of civil government and how that teaching should apply to our situations today.

This means that in a healthy church we will find that some people emphasize influencing the government and politics, others emphasize influencing the business world, others emphasize influencing the educational system, others entertainment and the media, others marriage and the family, and so forth. When that happens, it seems to me that we should encourage, not discourage, one another. We should adopt the attitude toward each other that Paul encouraged in the church at Rome:

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.… So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother (Rom. 14:10–13).

**E. Which political issues should pastors and professors speak about?**

1. How many political issues?

I’m not going to tell pastors how many political issues they should preach about

but I am sure of this: –> the right answer is not 0.

In *Politics According to the Bible*, I wrote about how I personally would analyze over 60 specific issues from my understanding of the Bible’s teachings on government and human life.

to pastors: preach on some of these issues

Paul thought he was accountable to God to preach on everything the Bible taught

**Ac 20:26-27:** Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

**2. Specific issues:** Here are several that can profitably be addressed by a pastor with a mature understanding of Scripture:

a. Same sex “marriage” – and how Christians should respond when challenged

b. Abortion

c. Racial discrimination

d. School choice

– b/c Scripture gives parents, not govt., the primary respons. for raising their children,

-- b/c failing public schools are (I think) the primary cause of ongoing poverty, of long-term unemployment, of much crime, and persistent racial disparities in income

-- b/c many of the secular values taught in public schools are contrary to values Ctn parents want inculcated in their children

e. Need to respect and apprec. police and military forces (Rom 13) -- plus the need to hold rogue police accountable for illegal actions.

f. Immigration

g. Capital punishment

h. Positive value of subduing the earth, making wise use of the earth’s abundant resources, put there by God for our benefit and enjoyment

i. Positive moral value of private ownership of property and free market econ system (as opposed to gov ownership & control of property) – much teaching in Scr.

j. Values of Constitutional freedoms:

freedom of religion

freedom of speech

freedom of the press

freedom peaceably to assemble

k. Value of government by consent of the governed, and dangers of tyranny

- tyranny by unelected judges making laws rather than interpreting laws

- tyranny by executive branch making new laws through regulations, and failing to enforce existing laws

l. Israel and the Middle East

m. Basic civics class teaching people how US government works – something many schools tragically fail to teach effectively anymore.

**3. Differences**

It is not necessarily bad if Christians differ on some of these issues, and it might be healthy, for some of them, to have a forum with Christians advocating various views.

That surely happened with the slavery controversy – and the proslavery advocates in the church were vastly outnumbered in the debate and they eventually lost and lost decisively.

**4. Pulpits and the nation**

Since 1954 “Johnson Amendment” to the Internal Revenue Code, which put some restrictions on the political speech of churches, the pulpits of America, which should be the moral conscience of our government, have been largely muzzled out of fear – largely ungrounded fear.

And there is strong reason to believe this IRS law is itself unconstitutional

-freedom of religion

-freedom of speech

🡪 no Q at all that churches are free to advocate for and against various moral and spiritual issues that impact political questions (without mentioning particular candidates by name)

**F. Reasons for hope**

**1. The Lord God Almighty rules over the nations**

For kingship belongs to the Lord, and *he rules over the nations* (Ps. 22:28).

Who rules by his might forever, *whose eyes keep watch on the nations*— let not the rebellious exalt themselves (Ps. 66:7).

For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up, but *it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another* (Ps. 75:6–7).

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and *his kingdom rules over all* (Ps. 103:19).

The *king’s heart* is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will (Prov. 21:1).

“*The Most High rules the kingdom of men* and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men” (Dan. 4:17).

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. (Matt. 28:18)

Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been *given you from above*” (John 19:11).

“And *he made from one man every nation* of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, *having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place*” (Acts 17:26).

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For *there is no authority except from God*, and those that exist have been instituted by God (Rom. 13:1).

**2. Jesus Christ continues even today to build his church**

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

🡪 I do not believe that he has paused or ceased in this promised work

throughout the world

or in the US

**3. The kingdom of God will not shrink but grow and spread**

(I’m an optimistic premillennialist.)

He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? 19 It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." 20 And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? 21 It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened." (Luke 13:18-21)

**4. God’s moral laws are still written on every person’s heart**

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them (Rom 2:14-15 ESV)

**5. The continuing importance and efficacy of the bold proclamation of the word of God**

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12 ESV)

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:30-31 ESV)

**4. (Personal judgment:) I do not believe that God has finished bringing good to the world through the United States of America**

Is there much evil in the US today? Could God judge us because of abundant evil?

Yes, certainly yes.

Because our government protect human freedoms to an amazing extent, citizens with evil hearts have freedom to promote destructive products such as pornography and harmful drugs, and harshly anti-Christian movies and literature.

And there are some Americans who export evil products throughout the world.

But, let’s not forget all the good that God in his sovereignty brings to the rest of the world through the United States of America:

a. Largest source of Christian missionaries, Christian literature, online Christian resources, in the whole world

b. Largest source of conservative evangelical biblical scholarship for whole world

(no matter what country I speak in, the books that line their library shelves and the books their sem. faculty read – largely from US authors, US publishers)

c. Pioneer and example for world of government “by the people” – national self-government by consent of the governed

1776 1 national democracy

1950 22

2010 120

d. Pioneer and example for world of freedom of religion

also: freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of assembly

e. Defender of many small nations against conquest by tyrants

(South Korea, Taiwan, Western Europe, Israel)

f. The only nation with enough military power to defend entire regions of the world against hostile domination by Russia, China, North Korea, or ISIS

- a power we have held at least since 1945, never once used for foreign conquest

g. Protector of world commerce (U.S. Navy keeps pirates and rogue nations from taking over the world’s sea lanes – at no charge to other countries who benefit from it)

h. Producer of 22% of the world’s wealth, with only 4.4% of the world’s population

$17.3 T/ 77.2 T

322 M people/ 7.28 B

i. World leader in medical, pharmaceutical, other scientific research

40% of all Nobel Prizes ever awarded – to Americans

j. Largest provider of food and medical aid for poor nations of the world

**5. But will God judge us as a nation?**

- We cannot know, and surely there is much evil in our nation.

But the United States is still not Sodom and Gomorrah, and it is nowhere near to the state of Sodom and Gomorrah -- there are still far more than 10 righteous in the nation.

*Operation World*, 7th edn, edited by Jason Mandryk (Colo Springs: Biblica, 2010)

says 29% of US pop. are evangelicals (fairly strictly defined)

– plus: there are many born-again Catholics (RC = 21% of population)

Even if some softness in numbers -- perhaps 15% to 25% of the population are people who regularly read their Bibles, pray to Jesus, and sincerely seek to honor God in their daily lives.

If God judges a nation with this much Christian influence and presence, then tell me, please, which nation of the world will he not judge?

**6. This is no time for retreat**.

When we lose a Supreme Court case on abortion,

or when we lose a Sup. Court case on same-sex marriage,

What should we do?

We should certainly cry out again to the Lord,

Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go forth, O God, with our armies.

(Psa 60:10 ESV)

but then:

Oh, grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man! 12 With God we shall do valiantly; it is he who will tread down our foes (Psa 60:11-12 ESV)

The political battle for the direction of our government, our laws, our courts, is ultimately a spiritual battle

-- it will be won, bit by bit, not by candidates and TV ads and campaigns alone,

but also not w/o candidates and TV ads and campaigns

-- when God gives blessing and effectiveness to candidates and TV ads and campaigns that promote biblical values

-- and when God persuades the hearts of many in the nation that

“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov 14:34)

Is this a time for retreat? A time to stop influencing politics and culture?

No.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;  
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat;  
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant, my feet!  
Our God is marching on.

1. Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004; formerly published as *Under the Influence*, 2001), 51, 53, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 116–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 274–76. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 276–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 287–89. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 251–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 253–58. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. MacArthur, *Why Government Can’t Save You*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)