

# The Role of Christians in Civil Government

President Woodrow Wilson once said, *“A nation which does not remember what it was yesterday, does not know what it is today, nor what it is trying to do. We are trying to do a futile thing if we don’t know where we have come from, or what we have been about.”*

Have we forgotten where we have come from and what we’re about, especially in regards to the role of the church, and of ministers and Christians in the civil arena? Let’s look back to where we came from and see if it can provide a road for success ahead.

A number of leaders are saying that Christians never have been involved in the civil arena and shouldn’t be now.

It has been said by one noteworthy pastor and a couple of Christian authors that Christians should NOT be concerned with what is going on in the secular culture or government.

- Our task is to obey our government, whatever it tells us to do.
- “Righteousness will not arrive on Air Force One.”

What do you think? Should Christianity be relegated only to the inside of the church? Or should we be involved in the civil arena? Should we have a compartmentalized mentality to our Christianity? The way I look at it is, if you turn out the light in a room, you only get one thing: DARKNESS. I would conclude that wherever we turn our lights out in the culture, we’ll have the same thing, no Christian influence.

To the contrary, today we have opportunities to dramatically improve our culture and be salt and light in a number of strategic areas in the public arena.

If we squander these opportunities, I believe future generations will ask WHY? Or, worse yet, they may well not even ask at all, having no desire to be one nation under God.

What exactly is the state of the nation today? One statistic that is not very encouraging says that 45% of Evangelicals who voted in recent elections said that **economics** was more important than morals. Sadly, if you look at recent elections, too often, we judge our national leaders, not by character or leadership, but by the success of the economy.

But if you read the Declaration of Independence, you'll see that economics – “taxation without representation” – was only one of the 27 reasons for separation from Great Britain.

But many of the Founders, including Samuel Adams and Charles Carroll, stated that religious freedom was the reason they joined the Revolution. They wanted the liberty to start missionary societies, Bible societies, and Sunday school societies.

If you were asked to name the leaders most responsible for our nation's Independence, who comes to mind? Most often we'll hear Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, John Hancock, or John Adams.

But if you ask John Adams, he would say that Rev. Dr. Mayhew and Rev. Dr. Cooper were the *"most conspicuous, the most ardent, and influential in the awakening and revival of American principles and feelings (that led to our independence)."*

For some reason, we don't hear a lot today about the role of the church and ministers and Christians in the founding of our civil government in America? We have been told that our founders were atheists, agnostics, and deists. History tells a different story.

The truth is, the fight for independence was influenced *heavily* by the work of pastors (1) in shaping the worldview of the nation, and (2) by the work of Christians in founding our government.

We like to *say* that the Bible relates to every area of our lives, but back then we *proved* it. We have thousands of published sermons from early America. Publishing sermons then was nothing

like it is today. It took a considerable amount of time and money to do so and it was done only when the demand was very high and had a significant life-changing impact on the listeners.

The fact that we have so many published sermons on such a wide variety of topics shows that they believed that there was nothing in all of life that the Bible did not address directly or indirectly. Some of the published sermons are on topics such as earthquakes, fires, solar eclipses, and even railroads.

One of the most common annual sermons was called an **Election Sermon**. They had the longest tradition of any annual sermon, the earliest known in 1634 all the way up till the 20th century.

What were the Election Sermons about? Pastors preached about our dual citizenship – God’s expectations for us on heaven and on earth. They said God had given them a stewardship government that belonged to WE THE PEOPLE.

So what did God expect in our stewardship capacity over the civil government He had given us? What did God expect from us in the selection of our leaders? What did the Word say about this process and our responsibilities?

Pastors also took the opportunity to impact the civil leaders directly. Many state legislatures often invited a minister to open each session each year with a sermon about the Biblical principles of law making.

From the pulpit, preachers used to regularly call candidates and parties by name, compare them to the Bible and then say you could or couldn't vote for them based on what the candidate said. One was titled, *“A Voice of Warning to Christians on The Ensuing Election of a President of the United States.”*

This was also a common practice in the Bible. Recall:

- Elijah with Ahab and Jezebel
- Samuel with Saul

- Nathan and Gad with David
- Isaiah with Manasseh
- And many others

Never were spiritual leaders to be silent in re: to civil leaders and civil issues. How prevalent is this practice today and what happens when they do? For one, the liberal media begins to howl FOUL and then call on the IRS to investigate. They cry for separation of church and state!

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Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin are likely the two most recognized founders who are also most likely noted as the two least religious men, often referred to as deists. But how unreligious were they really?

As Governor of Pennsylvania, Franklin (1) issued statewide prayer proclamations, (2) recommended Christianity in the public schools, and (3) worked to boost church attendance across the state. He was also (4) the one who called for the establishment of chaplains and daily prayer at the constitutional convention.

Today, what would you say Thomas Jefferson is most widely known for as it relates to religion and civil government? “Separation of church and state,” right?

But Thomas Jefferson himself urged the lifting of restrictions against clergy and ministers that had been imposed in VA: *“I observe in...[the Virginia] Constitution an abridgment of [a] right...I do not approve. It is the incapacitation of a clergyman from being elected.”*

Thomas Jefferson himself recommended that the great seal of the United States depict a Bible story and include the word “God” in the national motto, and as President negotiated treaties with Indians in which he included direct funding to pay for Christian missionaries to evangelize the Indians, which were ratified by the Senate.

That’s not separation of church and state! So how did we get where we are today? It’s been a slow process, no doubt, but there have been some significant events.

One was in 1954, when a U.S. Senator from Texas, Lyndon B. Johnson, was being criticized for his private business dealings and political affiliations. Wishing to silence his critics in the pulpit, he changed the tax laws for 501(c)(3) organizations and henceforth prohibited them from discussing political issues. And now, too many people think this is the way that it's always been.

The record is clear: the Church helped shape the way that early America approached the issues of the day, and having taught the nation the relevancy of God's word to every aspect of life, it's not surprising then that the Scriptures and writers on the Scriptures had such a profound impact on the founding of our government and its documents.

George Washington, in his famous farewell address of 1796, reminded us why our government and its policies were so successful: *"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."*

Yet, many today, have fallen into believing that Christians should not be involved in civil government; there should be some sort of compartmentalization; that our faith should be kept in one arena and real life in another, and the two should never meet.

Despite the rich heritage of Christian faith and expression in America and the strong foundation that it's provided for our country, things have begun to change. In only a few short decades, hundreds of years of religious freedoms have been erased or morphed into something likely indiscernible by our Founders.

Listen to what one Federal judge said in the case of *Jane Doe v. Santa Fe Independent School District* when a handful of students were offended by public prayer at school events and the upcoming graduation. Although he said prayer could take place, it would be done only within restrictions:

“The Court will allow that prayer to be a typical nondenominational prayer, which can refer to God or the Almighty or that sort of thing. The prayer must not refer to...Jesus...or anyone else. And make no mistake, the Court is going to have a United States marshal in attendance at the graduation. If any student offends this Court, that student will be summarily arrested and will face up to six months incarceration in the Galveston County Jail for contempt of Court...Anybody who violates these orders, no kidding, is going to wish that he or she had died as a child when this Court gets through with it.”

Can't this judge read the Constitution, you ask? The problem is, the Constitution does *not* govern America. During the Constitutional Convention, the Founders discussed the impact it would have in limiting the misconduct of public officials.

John Francis Mercer summed it up: *“It is a great mistake to suppose that the paper we are to propose will govern the United States. It is the men whom it will bring into the government and interest [they have] in maintaining it that are to govern them. The paper will only mark out the mode and the form. Men are the substance and must do the business.”*

The good news is that **we** have the power to elect our leaders. But if **we** elect the wrong leaders, the Constitution will be as worthless in their hands as it was with this judge's. Israel's laws were the best – written by God Himself – but they were worthless under wicked rulers like Ahab and Manasseh.

The key to good government then is how good our rulers are. The question I ask is why we haven't taken our stewardship seriously? In America, there are 60 million evangelicals but only 15 million vote, while 24 million are not even registered.

If our culture is moving the wrong direction due to significant influence from an often-hostile civil government, I believe it's because of Christian non-involvement. We have failed to pay proper attention to those in authority.

Is it possible that the highly “secular” institution of government has something very important to do with morality?

- Did it with slavery?
- How about abortion?

If so, might it then follow that Christians have a reason to pay attention to what government does? If we care about people, we are commanded to care about civil government.

Which cultural and moral issues today do NOT impact people?

Recall that Jesus spoke about eternal life in terms of our response to the needs of those around us:

- Parable of the Good Samaritan
- When we care for the least, we care for Him

President James A. Garfield said,

*“Now, more than ever before, the people are responsible for the character of their Congress. If that body be ignorant, reckless, and corrupt, it is because the people tolerate ignorance, recklessness, and corruption. If it be intelligent, brave, and pure, it is because the people demand these high qualities to represent them in the national legislature...[I]f the next centennial does not find us a great nation...it will be because those who represent the enterprise, the culture, and the morality of the nation do not aid in controlling the political forces.”*

Why don't our national policies reflect our national values?

- 78% supports prayer in school
- 74% wants the 10 Commandments back in the classroom
- 68% wants creation taught in public schools
- 66% opposes partial-birth abortions

Support for these issues by the general public is not nearly as high in Congress or in the Courts.

Why? It's because Americans who embrace these values are simply not voting, not exercising the stewardship of their citizenship.

Rev. Charles Finney warned:

*“The Church must take right ground in regard to politics..[T]he time has come that Christians must vote for honest men and take consistent ground in politics...Christians have been exceedingly guilty in this matter. But the time has come when they must act differently...God cannot sustain this free and blessed country which we love and pray for unless the Church will take right ground...It seems sometimes as if the foundations of the nation are becoming rotten, and Christians seems to act as if they think God does not see what they do in politics. But I tell you He does see it, and He will bless or curse this nation according to the course [Christians] take [in politics].”*

What legacy will we leave the next generation? I hope it's Psalm 33:12: *“Blessed is that nation whose God is the Lord.”*